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WEEKLY

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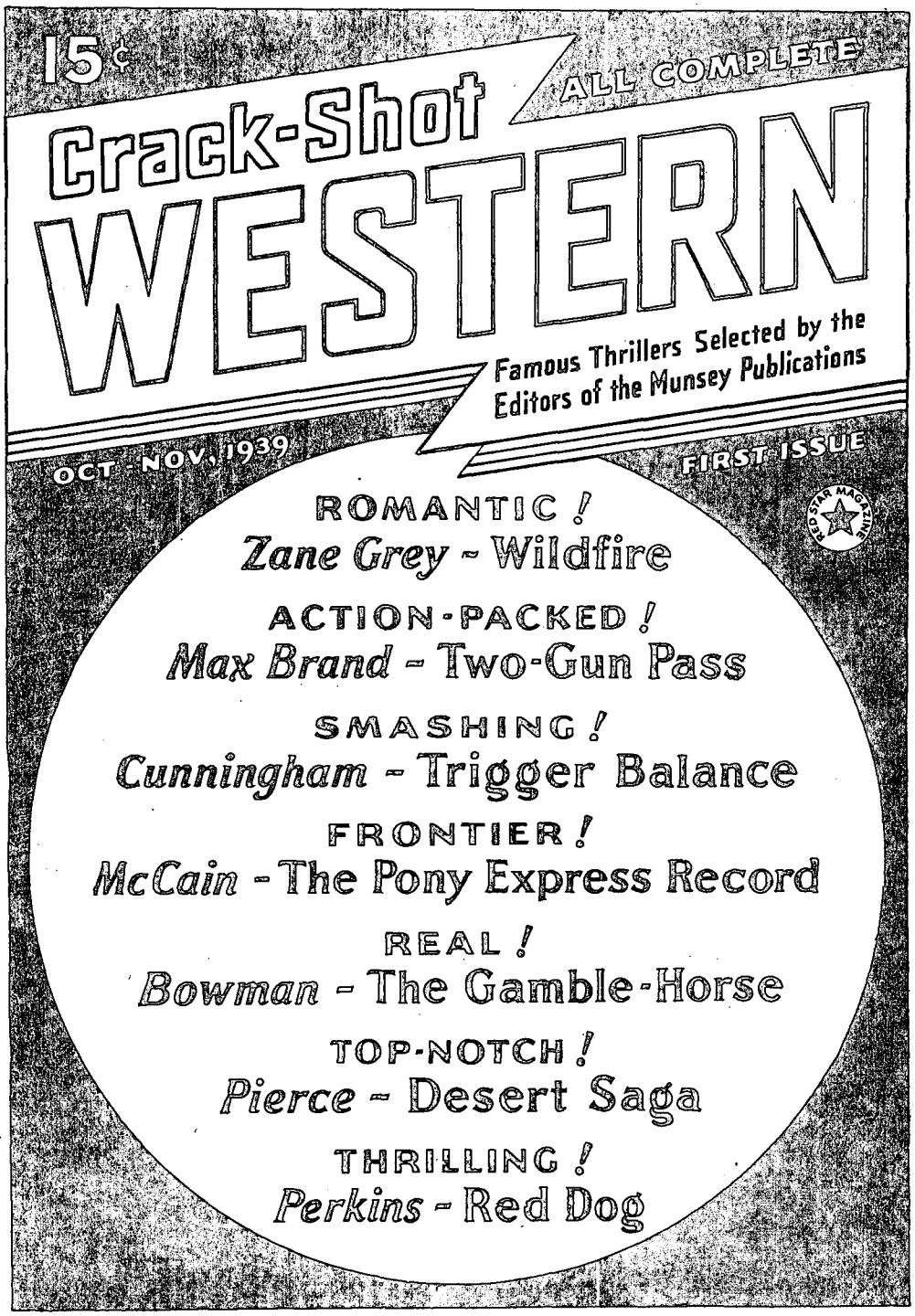

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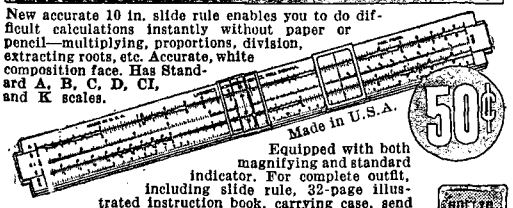

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30x5.25-20	2.95	1.35
31x5.25-21	3.25	1.35
5.50-17	3.35	1.40
28x5.50-18	3.35	1.40
29x5.50-19	3.35	1.45
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ARGOSY

America's Oldest and Best All-Fiction Magazine

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The Devil's Diary

On Broadway and 52nd Street they know who the Devil is. He's Manhattan's Man-at-the-Keyhole; and tonight the glamor boys and gals sit quaking in their evening clothes—for tomorrow all their hush-hush secrets will be public property. Beginning a glittering new novel

By WILLIAM DU BOIS

CHAPTER I

THURSDAY EVENING: 10:30

THEY had Hollywood floods on the marquee of the Miramar where Dan and I pushed our way in, and American beauties once removed were spilling out of their town cars at a dime a dozen. I guess every stooge in New York who owned a tailcoat—and quite a few who didn't—had turned up for that opening. Going down the big mirrored staircase was like diving into a tank full of barracuda. You never saw so many straight white ties, so many crooked yellow smiles.

The opening was Dan's assignment, not mine. I'd trailed along for an hour, because Dan is new in the shop, and Mac had asked me to set his feet right. At least, that was my reason for leaving the city room when I had a story of my own to write. Naturally you seldom act from a simple motive when you've been in newspaper work as long as I. Whose business was it but mine, if Dr. Joe had phoned and asked me to turn up at the Miramar around eleven—just so we could talk a little later?

Mavis Marlan (who is one of the shapeliest show-girls in captivity) was doing her strip-tease burlesque when we sat down at our ringside table—and I only looked once. Does that indicate how depressed I was? So would you be, if your wife had been at your throat since noon. Especially a wife with teeth and claws like Trudy's.

Cynics will say that actors, doctors and newspapermen should never marry; and I was all for the cynics at that moment. Was it my fault that our city editor had assigned me to that damned diary? Or that Ray gave out releases only through Daphne Carter, the picture of what every wife expects a secretary to be?

It all began when Daphne had arranged to meet me at the Stork, to get today's

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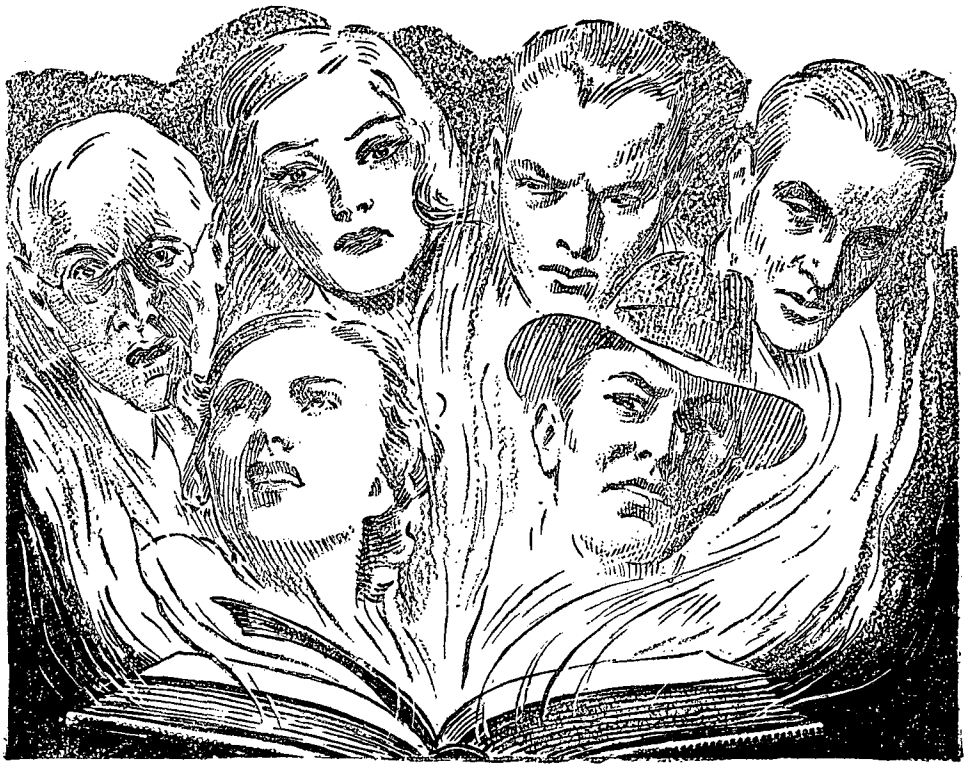

story assembled. I suppose you meet people at the Stork from force of habit, when you're secretary to a columnist. Unfortunately, I had broken a luncheon date with Trudy to chase down that copy; and Trudy had sailed into the Stork that noon for a henparty—just in time to see Daphne and me with our heads together at the bar. No more, no less, but quite enough.

Not that a fight with my wife is news. Probably I could have taken this battle in my stride, if we hadn't been starting our vacation tomorrow. Naturally, I'd lost the fine glow every wage-slave feels when he's about to slam the lid on his desk. Perhaps she'd start speaking before our boat docked in Bermuda. Perhaps I'd better just start on that press-agent Scotch. . . .

"Well, is it hot?" asked Dan.

"Don't start your sentences in the middle," I said. "They taught you better than that at Columbia."

He blushed, as only a cub can. "Gosh, Mr. Jordan, I didn't mean to—"

"The name is Jack, and I'm glad you brought a nose for news out of that school of journalism. Sorry there isn't any."

"You mean, you can't talk?"

"I've nothing to talk about. I mean that Larry Ray's diary has been under lock and key, so far as I'm concerned."

"Then you haven't read it?"

I LOOKED him straight in the eye. "If you want my honest opinion, I don't think the boss himself has seen the manuscript—so far."

"But how could you write a daily story about it, if—"

"You mean a daily blurb until publication. Something to start the masses talking, until we print that first instalment on Monday. Based entirely on hints from Daphne."

"What sort of hints?"

You picked the right profession, I

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thought admiringly. "Chapter-headings, mostly. My typewriter coined the rest."

"What's your guess then? Is it dynamite?"

"Suppose you were a libel-proof columnist, on the verge of retiring? What sort of diary would you turn in to your newspaper? And how much would that diary be worth to the *Star,* if it leaked out ahead of time?"

"I've read your stories, carefully. They certainly sounded as though you'd had a peek or two."

"I'm a reporter. Pretending I've an inside track is second nature."

"For instance, when you said Senator Parsons would have a lot of explaining to do—"

"What senator doesn't, when he's up for re-election?"

"Then you mentioned Nancy Janeway—"

"Chapter Two is called Some Brother Columnists—and One Sister. Make your own bets."

"Would Ray knife someone on the same paper?"

"One can never be sure who Ray will knife next. That's why he's such a nice person not to know."

"Why should he be out for Miss Janeway? Surely their columns don't conflict."

"My guess is that he hates her because she belongs in the Social Register, in spite of her habits. You know—entree to homes that wouldn't let Ray past the service-elevator. Naturally, Ray is a snob, like all self-made heels."

"Check," said Dan. "What about Mark Evans?"

"What about him?"

"He's sitting at a table right across the floor from us."

"I thought I smelt ham frying."

"Aren't you afraid to be in the same night club with Evans, after the cracks you made yesterday?"

"Listen, Dan, could the *Star* print anything about that Hollywood hero that wasn't true, at one time in his career?" I took my time on the next one. "But if you must pick out faces—look at that big party, two tables beyond Evans. Dr. Joseph Piccari, with his Park Avenue primrose. It really took courage, mentioning his old man by name. Even though Old Joe and I have been friends since he stopped killing people for business reasons."

I had said it as casually as I could, just to cover anything young Joe might do later. So far, he hadn't made a move, though I was sure he could see me plainly from where he sat.

"You know an awful lot of people, Jack—from the inside out."

"Most people are nicer from the outside in," I said. "Here comes Bozo. Get your mind on your job."

BOZO BENTON has been a master of ceremonies in night clubs ever since stale air was invented. So the gang gave him a big hand when he skidded out under the spotlight. Next thing I knew, a baby spot had picked out our table, and he was introducing me to them all.

"Jack Jordan, the demon reporter. Tell me, Jack, how many of us can show our faces here on Monday?"

Well, that was one way of measuring Ray's importance in New York.

"Read the *Star* and find out," I shouted back, and poured my first drink in all of an hour.

"Gosh, Jack," said Dan, "should I put that in the story?"

"Not on your life. Tonight, you're a critic, not a reporter."

It picked me up at once, to see how his eyes were shining. This would be his biggest story since he came down from Columbia to work for us; and he was going at it as though he expected a Pulitzer Prize on the spot . . . which is the way newspapermen are made, after all. Far be it from me to slow down his punches.

Bozo went right down the line, introducing the same old afterdark celebrities, including a few who had actually paid for their tables. People who have to be seen

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at one opening a week to be remembered. Actresses whose last tycoon had divorced them before the Hoover depression. Novelists who had sold out to pictures, and playwrights who wished they could. Debs, pretending to be modest under the limelight, and stealing more bows than the Broadway climbers. Mark Evans was with a bevy, as always. He got a big reception when he tried to rise for a bow, and couldn't.

But a veteran m.c. like Bozo knew enough to keep away from young Joe Piccari. Not that Dr. Joe and that femme fatale of his aren't seen everywhere together; not that they didn't both rate an introduction, more than anyone else in the club. It just happens that the lady is famous for being allergic to limelight. Remember the headlines when she pushed that *Life* cameraman off the *Queen Mary?*

Just the same, I held my breath until Bozo was safely past their table. Not that I wasn't plenty sore at young Joe by that time. Never mind what the boys say, either. I'd always refused to believe that he'd gone high-hat. But I'd postponed my own work to trot over to this honkytonk and find out what he wanted. Wouldn't you say it was time he gave me some kind of tumble?

All right, he was escorting the only daughter of the Drovers' Bank, a high-strung young lady who hated the press. Maybe he figured he had the chance to marry her, now he had separated her from a brain tumor no other surgeon in America would touch. . . . Did that mean I should stick around all night, waiting for him to remember we were friends?

I was still waiting when the lights went down to blackout, and they wheeled out Rita Arden's piano. Don't ask me to describe her at this late date; it would be like trying to describe Times Square on New Year's Eve. The almanac will tell you that she is well over sixty. You forget all that when she makes her entrance; and when she starts singing, you'll call the almanac a cock-eyed liar. Rita made you forget fish-eyed waiters and has-been hussies alike. You even forgot that your wife was sitting home glaring at a telephone with her arms folded. In short, you didn't need that second drink to feel that life might eventually be worth living.

But someone had taken advantage of the dark to sit down at our table.

"Imagine you, guiding the footsteps of youth," said Nancy Janeway.

THE lights went up, and Rita ran out on her applause. Dan was still turned toward the floor, too tranced to think of taking notes.

"One of ours?" asked Nancy. "Introduce me."

Dan is a very well-mannered young man, but he did gape a little when I presented the *Star's* female columnist. I had gaped myself, the first time Miss Gossip had swung her man's opera cape through our city room. Not that Nancy had done anything so vulgar for years; few of the cubs had laid eyes on her inside the shop. They said she used Carey's private lift to whisk up to her office—whenever she condescended to work there. They also said she smoked marijuana just before she sat down to her column. Of course, Nancy Janeway in the flesh was her own best advertisement. Long thoroughbred lines, hair that had changed color three times since I'd known her, yet always looked natural. Her face? She might have been twenty or fifty, it was that wonderfully massaged.

Dan said something polite. Would his writeup conflict with hers? Janeway smiled at him out of those twenty-one jewel eyes.

"The Miramar? I haven't mentioned the Miramar for years. Sometimes, I wonder why they let me in."

"So do I, Nancy," I murmured. "And now we're on the subject, what *are* you writing these days, anyhow?"

"Don't you look for my column?"

"Carefully. That's why I asked."

I was being mean for her good. Janeway had always been a copyreaders' curse; but lately her stuff had been too illegible for even the slotman to decipher. Mac had

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sent a bad batch up to Carey himself, with a howler attached; and the big boss had given them permission to kill her any morning we were tight. Believe it or not, she didn't have a single friend on the *Star* to warn her of these storm signals.

"Haven't you wondered why you've missed two issues this week?" I asked.

"Haven't you learned to mind your own business?"

"This from you, Miss Gossip?"

"Don't tease me tonight, Jack. I'm much too exhausted to snap back."

For a split second, she had really let down, and I saw what a tired cat she was, under her makeup. Then she turned back to Dan, and her manner was all velvet again, like her voice.

"May I borrow Jack a moment? Someone across the floor is dying to meet him."

Nancy put one of those ultra-svelte arms through mine, and we marched straight for Evans' table. Don't ask me why I went, either. Maybe I figured a good brawl is tonic for the nerves.

Evans managed to get up, this time, swaying badly on those long cowboy legs. Each of his pictures is sure to gross a million, and he looks like the butcher boy on payday. Even without the champagne he'd spilled down the front of his two-hundred-dollar dress suit.

When his fist came crashing at my face, I was more than ready. After all, it was the sort of roundhouse punch that any boxer can step inside. I jolted him once, and we clinched. I went in fast, too, just to play safe. He's carried that gun under his arm ever since he clicked as the sheriff in *Hell's Half-Acre*. It's part of his publicity build-up, the cowboy-in-the-white-tie personality. Why, his press agent even took out a permit, so Evans could wear that shooting-iron on his trips East. Remember the night he blew the necks off every bottle in the Penguin Bar, just to win a bet?

The flying squad took over before the girls at Evans' table had had time to scream; and Mario, the major-domo, had me by the arm, soothing me into the bar. They handle drunks beautifully at the Miramar. Lord knows, they've had practice enough.

As for young Joe, he had watched it all over his lovely lady's shoulder, without a flicker. I think that's the thing that really hurt. Not that I'd been in any real need of help, of course.

But I felt a little sick as I sat down on the first empty barstool. Not because a fist had just whizzed by my head, either. I've had worse, in better dives than this. I think it was the putty-soft feel of that movie star's body, when we went into our clinch. You wouldn't believe such a tailor-made Adonis could be so flabby. For no reason at all, I remembered a tong war I'd covered, remembered helping the boys from Bellevue carry a dead Chinaman out of an alley.

Then I saw that Mario was still hovering.

"Back to your reservations," I said. "I'm not going in for another round."

"The fact is, Mr. Jordan, I was coming to your table with a message, a moment ago. Then I saw that Miss Janeway had —invited you across the floor."

"Don't keep secrets from me, Mario."

"This happens to be confidential, sir. Miss Arden would like you to drop into her dressing-room a moment, before she goes on again."

CHAPTER II

THURSDAY EVENING: 11:00

RITA was lying in an old Morris chair with her eyes closed when I put my head in at her door. Did I say she was past sixty? Under the naked bulbs on her mirror, she looked at least a hundred. I'd known her myself, off and on, for more years than I care to remember. I'm always amazed that anyone could be so Broadway battered, and still survive.

"Come in, Jack," she said, without opening her eyes. She might have been dreaming of a hot bath and tea with a dash of rum. Anything but the werewolves waiting down the hall to be amused.

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"What's your trouble, Rita?"

"My next entrance. What's yours?"

"Mario said you wanted me."

Her once-international lashes fluttered, and her eyes gave me a warm blue smile. "Darling, I've wanted someone like you all my life."

"Would you mind putting that in writing? I could show it to my wife, as a testimonial."

She was smiling now with all her wrinkles. "You relax me, Jack Jordan—Heaven knows why. Don't tell me I've got to explain why I sent for you."

"Rita, please don't ask me about Ray's diary."

"Why haven't you mentioned me in your stories? Hasn't Ray put me in it?"

"Would he dare to leave you out?" I said gallantly. "A Times Square memoir without you would be like New York harbor without the Statue of Liberty."

"Then what about a little advance publicity from you?"

"I don't mind guessing what sort of mud he'll throw at the others. You're different."

"I'll bet you tell that to all the girls."

"On the contrary. You should have seen me with Janeway just now."

"I hear a friend of hers just took a punch at you."

"News travels fast in night clubs."

"You might have picked a better place to spend your evening. Don't you realize that punch is only a sample?"

"What's this, a friendly warning?"

"You've been showing off a lot of inside knowledge, lately. Or pretending to. Use your head, and be out of town on Monday."

"I'm sailing tomorrow for Bermuda. Will that do?"

"Nicely."

Someone rapped. "Five minutes, Miss Arden."

"That's my second turn. You might drop in tomorrow noon, before you sail. If you're still alive."

"Relax, Rita. No one has tried to shoot me in years."

"Just the same, I wouldn't walk in dark streets alone tonight. Not if I was supposed to know as much as you."

I started to ask for more of the same, then changed my mind. Rita had said her piece for this evening, I knew her well enough for that. She had leaned back in the Morris chair and closed her eyes again. You'd have sworn she had forgotten my existence as I tiptoed out.

JANEWAY beckoned to me when I cut through the bar again. It was jammed now. People had come in for the last half of the floor-show, and were doing their drinking standing up to avoid a cover charge. Nancy had saved a place for me, and signaled a barman.

"Liquor never makes me talkative," I said. "You should know that."

"Now Jack. I only wanted to tell you how sorry I am about Mark. I'd forgotten that picture people can read."

"Come off it, Nancy. When we went over to Evans' table, you were praying he'd take a poke at me."

"You must be clairvoyant." She gave her brandy a thin-lipped smile. "Naturally, I'm very angry at you, after what you've been writing about—well, about all of us."

"Where's Evans now?"

"They poured him into a taxi five minutes ago."

"I suppose he thinks I'm in cahoots with Ray."

"What else can he think? He's furious that you should drop those hints in yesterday's *Star*, before his studio can buy Ray off."

"Suppose Ray really has the goods on that gin-soaked maverick. D'you think there's enough cash in Hollywood to keep it out of print?"

"Jack, you're too exasperating. I know you've been back in old Arden's dressing-room, telling her everything."

"Rita knows everything now; she's old enough."

"You've read that diary from cover to cover. Why go on pretending otherwise?"

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So there we were. You couldn't expect Miss Gossip to believe that I'd stood in a safe-deposit vault that afternoon, to watch Larry Ray draw out the one and only copy of his memoirs. Or that this was my first glimpse of the manuscript—and the last I hoped to have, until it went to the compositors. So many people had laughed at that story today that I was beginning to doubt it myself.

"I'm buying this drink," she said. "Don't I get a dividend?"

"If you're asking me what Ray has written about you, Nancy, on the level I can't—"

"That's a good boy—be loyal to Carey."

"Listen, Nancy. The boss hasn't said one word to me about this assignment so far. My orders have come from our city room—from Mac. To blow up a daily story on Ray, until—" But I saw she wasn't listening.

"So you think it's safe to turn me down, Jack—now you know I'm on the toboggan."

This time, she had really let down the mask. Perhaps it was the double brandy she had just polished off in a few quick swallows. Anyhow, she had grown ten years older in five minutes. Even the candle-power in those famous eyes was suffering from short circuit.

"My contract is up in January," she said. "Carey doesn't mind what the *Star* calls me now."

"You'll be in good company, Nancy. At least one ex rum-king, a lens-louse, Lord knows how many assorted heelers—"

"And you still insist you haven't read every word?"

"So help me, just a few chapter headings. Just a few cocktails with Daphne—"

"You're a good reporter, Jack Jordan. If they looked for your heart, all they'd find is a dictaphone."

"Speak for yourself, Janeway."

But she had already tossed a dollar to the barman. "That's for nothing, newspaperman."

She was all slim-golden attitude again, going down the stairs to the lobby. I sat on, alone with her Scotch and my conscience, trying very hard not to feel sorry for her. After all, she deserved what she was getting, with interest. At the same time, I would have liked to cheer her up a little.

Of course, cheering up Nancy Janeway would be like sticking your head in a showcase and asking a dummy to relax.

I turned back to the Scotch, just as a man sat down on the stool beside me.

"I was waiting for that vampire to leave," he said.

"Hi, Joe," I said. "What's your poison?"

CHAPTER III

THURSDAY EVENING: 11:15

I SHOULD have called him Dr. Piccari, of course. There aren't many people around New York who call young Joe by his first name these days. But I've one of those unfortunately accurate memories, and I just can't forget who his father is. Lord knows, it's one of those things that should be forgotten. Forgiven, where young Joe is concerned. He was a good guy then. I say he's a good guy now, even if he has gone big-rich.

We'd met for the first time on the deck of the *Mariposa,* the flag-ship of his dad's fleet, so to speak. She had been anchored off Fire Island in a pea-soup fog, and you needn't ask me how I got aboard, either. Young Joe had come out in a sea-sled to do an emergency on the mate. Even if he was still in medical school, with no right to practice. The deck was bouncing like a Coney Island catwalk that morning, but he had the gorilla's appendix out in fourteen minutes flat.

Naturally, the story had never seen print. It meant more for the *Star,* if we played ball with old Joe where his son was concerned. Besides, I do give my friends a break occasionally, believe it or not; and young Joe had been my friend from that moment. . . . Let me tell you, he stood out in that gang of twentieth-century pirates like a diamond in Woolworth's.

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All right, he used his father's gunmen for guinea pigs. He wanted to be a surgeon, didn't he? Why shouldn't a public enemy serve a useful purpose now and then?

All this was ten years ago. Dr. Joesph Piccari has gone places since—on his own. I don't have to tell you about the work he's done in his free Children's Clinic, do I? Or how he collects five thousand bucks for his Park Avenue appendectomies. Not to mention his lecture work, his fees as a consultant, a few Rockefeller medals . . .

No one knows just when he broke with his old man; but it must have been shortly after young Joe graduated. It wasn't a bitter break, exactly. Just a decision, on the boy's part, to become a full-fledged member of society, with no strings in the past. I know for a fact that he refused help from his father when he set up in practice. And every dime he's made since, he has made honestly.

As for old Joe, the world knows how he retired—if a rum-king can ever retire. You've seen pictures of his Long Island retreat, complete with barbed wire and bullet-proof glass. For the past few years, he might as well have been buried in a gold coffin, as far as young Joe was concerned.

Now, if I read the portents, Larry Ray intended to dig him up again.

I looked young Joe over. He had the spare, indestructible look of the second generation Latin who has run to brains and nerves, instead of fat. In fact, I guess he was about the handsomest boy you'll see this side of the Gold Coast. Funny how you always thought of him as a boy, in spite of his position. He isn't much over thirty now, and he'll look the same when he's seventy. He belonged to his London tailcoat, just as you and I belong to our skin. Maybe he even belonged to Claire Cummings, in spite of what I'd heard of her.

I'd been watching him for a long time now, hoping the rich would not spoil him. But if that's what he wanted—well, I guess he's earned it. Anyhow, we were pals again, before we'd spoken a dozen words. Nothing could spoil Dr. Joe for long, where I'm concerned.

"Claire is dancing," he said, "so I've got a moment."

"Don't apologize. All I have to do tonight is a two-column story for the break-page. I'm sure they won't mind holding the press."

He ignored my feeble sarcasm. "I watched you handle that drunk, Jack. Congratulations. I couldn't have done better myself."

"Is that why you didn't mix in and help?"

He smiled uneasily, but his eyes didn't drop. "I saw it would be over quickly. Naturally, I did not want to distress my guests."

"You needn't worry about introducing me to your gold-plated friends, Joe. I'm proud myself."

His eyes really dropped, now. "No one ever understands. I don't suppose I should expect them to."

LORD knows, I'd always known what he was after before. We had certainly been friends long enough to call each other any name we liked. Why couldn't he come clean with me now? I decided to go on being tough, and see what results I could get.

"All right, old-timer," I said. "Don't apologize for the company you're keeping these days. Tell me what's on your mind."

"Can't you guess?"

I made my face a blank. "We reporters stick to facts when we can, Doctor."

"You look much too sober, Jack. Let me buy you another."

I emptied my glass, and called the barman. If this was a racket, why not make the most of it?

"I have been reading your stories in the *Star*," he said.

"You too, Brutus? I thought you stopped reading tabloids long ago."

"You might be surprised who reads them, Jack."

"Oh no I wouldn't."

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"What you write about this diary is—true?"

"Too true, Doctor."

"Am I to understand that one chapter deals with—how shall I say—?"

"The Piccari?"

"I was about to use the archaic word bootlegging."

"Weren't they synonyms—once?"

"Please, Jack."

"I'm being nasty on purpose, to smoke you out."

"Would it help, if I saw Carey?"

"It might. But I wouldn't advise it."

"I know Ray, and what he's capable of. The publication of that diary must be stopped, somehow."

"So you can go ahead and marry your bank?"

I expected an outburst. All he did was break a pretzel between his fine surgeon's fingers. "I had hoped you would understand, Jack."

"You said that once."

"Won't you try?"

"How can I, if you keep me in the dark?"

"I had hoped you would tell me exactly what to expect from this diary."

"Believe it or not, Joe, I'd tell you if I could."

He looked at me for a long time. "I believe you."

"Why should Ray confide in anyone? He never has."

"Why indeed?"

Young Joe had his father's eyes, all right. You know—a hot brown look that's green underneath. The old Roman hate, primitive as Mussolini on a motorcycle. . . . He passed a hand over his forehead, and the look was gone. He was Dr. Piccari again. The surgeon who made fifty thousand a year and spent most of it on a clinic for children.

"You're a clever boy, Jack. Tell me what to do."

Go back where you belong, I wanted to say. Get back to your job of healing, and forget your bright-light gal. Why should you give a hoot what we print on you now? Aloud, I said, "I'm not so clever, Joe. If I were in your shoes, I suppose I'd just sit tight—and pray."

"I am not much good at prayers."

He got down from the barstool, and shook hands with me, with all his old warmth. "Thanks for seeing me tonight, Jack. Even if you couldn't help."

"Good luck, Joe."

We walked back to the stair together, and I let him go down to the dance floor alone. Two minutes later, he was doing a faultless rumba with Claire Cummings, beautiful as a piece of marble in her strapless wine velvet—and lots colder.

CHAPTER IV

THURSDAY EVENING: 11:45

I STOOD at the head of that staircase quite awhile, trying to make myself feel tighter than I was. Dan seemed to be making out fine without me. The press agent had brought most of the troupe over to have supper at the *Star's* table, during this long intermission for dancing. Mavis Marlan; Bozo, looking like a deacon minus his clown makeup. Rita herself, handling spaghetti as only a Latin can. Three human question marks, waiting to pounce on me. . . . I sent a waiter to tell Dan I was leaving, turned up my coat collar, and walked back to the shop.

The Paramount clock showed a quarter to twelve when I swung into our side street, and most of our early mail trucks had gone long ago. Still, it surprised me that the watchman would let a car park at the main entrance. Then I saw whose car it was, and got the point. A big, pre-airflow limousine, solid but not ostentatious. Just the sort of car you'd expect a self-made senator to ride in. But the girl in the back seat didn't belong in the limousine of Senator Anthony Parsons.

Show me a face, and my mind usually clicks like a candid camera. Especially when the face is as pretty and wholesome as hers. I was still kicking my memory for non-function when I sat down at my desk in the city room.

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Ike came up with my phone messages. Three from home, which I put in my pocket—it's always nice to know your wife is worried about you. Several from cranks, complaining that I'd written them up wrong, and others, who were sorry I'd written them up right. Also, one office communication that sent me scrambling for a mirror to make sure my hair was parted straight. Why couldn't they have sent a copy boy up to that night club, to say that Carey had been waiting fifteen minutes to see me?

The elevator was full of compositors going up to the restaurant for supper, but the operator and I had it to ourselves after the fourteenth floor. I'd only been in the big boss' office a few times, and I'll admit I felt a little spooked when the steel door slammed behind me and I faced down the long hall alone.

You see, there's nothing on top of the *Star* building but our auditing department, which only functions by daylight—the doctor's office, which means an interne asleep on the hospital cot—and the boss, waiting for me at the end of that hall like a lazy tiger. Suppose he asked to see the story I should have written an hour ago? Well, I'd have caught the presses with time to spare, if I hadn't been interrupted. I went down that long hall fast, knowing an excuse would come to me on the way.

You don't just walk into a newspaper publisher's office, of course, especially after midnight. In the case of Owen Carey, you generally rang a buzzer, and stated your business down a speaking tube. So I was all the more startled, when I saw the reception door was wide open, and I found myself walking right into the sanctum and the sound of battle.

An interviewer once called our boss a Roman emperor born a few thousand years too late. Since then, it's been fashionable to compare him to everything from a king cobra to Caligula. Actually, Owen Carey looked about as much like a Roman emperor as Shirley Temple.

At fifty-eight, he was a silver cherub, with baby-pink cheeks and a flawless porcelain smile. He could have passed for a retired ambassador, or a poster for old-age pensions, depending on your point of view. I might add that he was as easy to talk to as your favorite bartender, despite his millions. You'd never guess that he had come out of a goldspoon Harvard youth to build his father's modest Tory paper into a nationwide chain, with a radio hookup and control of at least two Hollywood studios.

The battle effects were all being contributed by Senator Anthony Parsons. When I stuck my head in the door, he was charging the boss' desk, shaking a wadded copy of the *Star* under Carey's nose, and making enough noise for three Solons. The boss was taking it with his nicest cherub smile. Nothing pleased him more than hearing a cornered politician howl.

"Of course it's unfortunate, so near election," he murmured, as the senator paused for breath. "But what can I do?"

The senator told him, with fireworks, while I waited to be noticed.

"Come in, Mr. Jordan," murmured Carey. "I've been expecting you."

PARSONS turned on his toes, smooth as a cat, and transferred his rage to me. I don't have to tell you that he is still our handsomest lawmaker at thirty-six. You'll recall, too, that he was just a month over the age minimum when he rode into his first term on a reform wave, a savior of the Lower Third for all his striped trousers and expensive aunts. A slim, dark, cameo-fine man, with something oddly foreign about him, despite that Knickerbocker pedigree. Strangely enough, he and Carey were two of a kind at that moment. I mean, both of them had the same smooth ruthlessness you seldom find in Americans. It takes a old nation to breed that kind of sandpapered caveman.

Not that I had time to think of such things now, being much too busy watching the Senator's footwork, in case he decided to hang one on me. Instead, he put the newspaper into my hands, with one

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contemptuous gesture. It was a copy of our early-mail, and the front page was all one screaming blurb.

"Did you do that, Jordan?"

"Mr. Jordan is one of our feature writers, Senator," put in Carey. "He has nothing to do with makeup."

The blurb showed Ray at a typewriter. Pages spilled out, with a few red-inked words on each:

A Hollywood Adonis
A sister columnist
A retired gunman
A senator up for re-election.

And, at the top and bottom of the page:

READ THE TRUTH ABOUT THEM ON MONDAY!

Well, my score for the evening was now one hundred percent.

"Nice layout, Mr. Carey," I said. "This first edition should be a collectors' item."

"Precisely what I've been telling the senator. Unfortunately, he still seems a bit worried. So worried, in fact, he intends to sue us for libel, unless we suspend publication of Mr. Ray's swan-song."

"That's the senator's privilege."

Carey passed a clipping across the desk to me. "Here's what he means to use as a—er—basis for his action."

I read, with Parsons breathing fire over my shoulder. This was a paragraph in a story of mine, which we had run on Wednesday:

"A certain senator, vitally interested in housing, had better look to his laurels." This was the cryptic statement of Lawrence Ray, when questioned about those Mystery Memoirs the *Star* is serializing. Or perhaps the statement is not so cryptic, when one begins narrowing down the list of senators—"

I smiled seraphically. "Did he really mean you, Senator?"

Carey was almost purring now. "You see? The young man is entirely innocent. He knows no more about the contents of that diary than you or I."

But Parsons had ignored me long ago. "You simply refuse to withdraw publication?"

"What else can I do now?"

They faced each other across the big rosewood desk—Carey cool as a cold-storage egg, the senator so purple it hurt your eyes to look. But it was his chin that dropped first, after all.

"I might have known I was wasting my time—"

"Then, sir, why waste more?"

"I shan't, Carey. You'll hear from my lawyer on Monday."

He made a fine, black-browed exit, leaving the hall door wide open. Neither of us budged until we heard the elevator close on him down the corridor.

"A SPLENDID bluff," said Carey. "I hope you enjoyed it half as much as I. Will you close the hall door, please?"

I closed it carefully, still wondering why he had sent for me. "Sorry if that story on Wednesday caused you any trouble, sir. But when you handle dynamite in the dark—"

"I've read those stories of yours carefully, Jordan. Excellent jobs, all of them."

"Libel's an ugly word, just the same, Mr. Carey."

"It's a word one hears often in this shop. Don't let it frighten you, after all these years."

"I was only wondering if—"

"Say it. You think I've gone too far, don't you? So do my lawyers, Jordan. And suppose I have? I'm a newspaper publisher, and I'm letting the heads fall where they may. Parsons may sue and be damned. You may be sure his backers won't give him much rope until after election."

"Has Ray got the goods on him this time?"

I met the blue fire in his eye without flinching—too much. You could always tell when you'd gone too far with Carey.

"Jordan, I was speaking the truth when I told Parsons I hadn't seen a word of that copy. That's why I phoned for you.

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I wanted a reporter present when the manuscript arrives." He looked at his watch. "I can't imagine what's causing the delay."

"Well sir, this is a real lead for tomorrow."

"You see, I'm a kind-hearted employer after all. The last story you do before your vacation should write itself."

I blinked. Imagine a man who had twenty papers to keep tabs on knowing about *my* leave of absence.

"Yes, Jordan, I try to keep an eye on everything, even vacation schedules. Let me take this opportunity to tell you that I'm adding an extra week to your month, and a bonus. We have enough people on the toboggan in this plant. I like to keep my standbys contented."

I shifted my chair a bit, hoping he wouldn't lean close enough to smell my breath.

"An old man like myself likes to have strength behind him. Just in case he overreaches himself, you understand."

I relaxed. "Of course, you'll have until Monday to edit the copy, sir."

"Precisely. Of course, it'll be a ticklish job, without Ray." He twinkled. "One hesitates to trim a cloth of purest gold."

"Is he really going straight to Florida, Mr. Carey?"

"This afternoon, his secretary showed me his plane ticket. A half-hour ago she phoned to say he had left his apartment, with the manuscript." He nodded toward the far wall. "That much, I think, we can rely on."

But I'd already turned sharply. You got so you felt Ray in a room before you saw him.

CHAPTER V

THURSDAY EVENING: 12:00

THEY say he's worn rubber-sole shoes since he was in the nursery—if you can picture Larry Ray cuddling a bunny in a play pen. He happened to be one of those people who are born old, with eyes that miss nothing. The sort of man who can sit quietly in a corner of Morocco on New Year's Eve, and hear what they're saying in the bar.

I suppose you'd call him distinguished, in a lean, gray way—until you looked twice. When he spoke, which wasn't often, he sounded as though he hadn't slept for a week. Of course, there are people along Broadway who claim he never sleeps at all. But you can't label a man who combines the best features of a safe-cracker and floating ectoplasm. Even his clothes didn't make sense. He was a fashion-plate from an old magazine gone yellow on the shelf.

Daphne hovered beside him, streamlined and normal as any blonde can ever be. They were standing in the far side of the room, away from the door I'd just closed. I still had no idea how they got in. Unless they walked along the window ledge like a pair of alley rabbits.

"Hello, Jordan," said Ray, and shook hands with me, ahead of the boss. It was always a shock, the clean, dry-palm way he shook hands.

Daphne crossed between us. "Here's the body, Mr. Carey," she said, breezily. "Where do I drop it?"

Then I noticed that she had a ream of smudged copy-paper under one arm. It certainly looked like the same manuscript they'd lifted out of the bank that afternoon. The first page must have come straight from Ray's own portable, judging by the number of hentrack corrections on the margin.

Naturally, I didn't get a chance for more than a glimpse, before the boss dived in. It was a little sickening, the way that old man's eyes lit up. Not that you could blame a publisher for whooping with joy over a piece of copy that was sure to boost his circulation. It was the pure evil of that well-bred chuckle that started the prickles on my neck, not to mention the look that shot from him to Ray and back again. A certain Tom must have chuckled like that, when he got his first glimpse of Lady Godiva.

I went over to the window, and pulled

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back Carey's fine Italian-tapestry portieres to let in a little fresh air. The view from that office has always lifted me out of myself and the rotten way I make a living. Tonight, New York just winked back at me with a million eyes, all of them slyly waiting. You could hear the hustlers slamming the last of the early-mail edition into the trucks in the alley seventeen stories below. . . . I hoped Carey would turn off that chuckle soon, and give me my orders. As it was, I'd have to do my story in takes.

Mignonette assailed my nostrils, so I knew Daphne was standing just behind me—though mignonette is the last perfume you'd associate with that lacquered wise-girl.

"I hope you've explained me to your wife by now," she said.

"Sorry, Daphne. You're the sort of girl a man never explains to his wife."

"She seemed so piqued at the Stork this noon. I only thought, if there was something I could—"

"You can take your boss to Florida," I said rudely, "and give me a chance to catch the edition."

"You should be taking notes now, Jack. A fine reporter you are, turning your back on history."

WE FACED into the room together. There they sat with a welter of manuscript between them, grinning like a pair of jackals. Carey had just shaken out his pen to sign a bluebound paper, which I recognized as one of our standard syndicate contracts.

There was lots more signing to do, after that. Including a covering letter which permitted the boss to make changes, at his discretion, in a manuscript provisionally entitled *On the Square,* by Lawrence Ray. Daphne and I solemnly witnessed each of them. If you think the office should have been swarming with lawyers and cameras, just remember that Carey had been at Harvard Law School before he blasted his way into the Fourth Estate. Also, that he was much too vain to let himself be photographed, since he started going bald.

"Any more facts, sir, before I start writing?"

He looked at me, lazily. "I'm conscious of our deadline as well as you, Mr. Jordan. Surely, with all these facts at your disposal, you can make your typewriter smoke."

"I'd like the city editor to see my lead now, if you don't mind, sir."

"I don't mind in the slightest. What Mr. Ray and I have to say to each other, from this moment on, is highly confidential. Would you like to take Daphne down in the private elevator?"

I almost jumped out of my skin. This *was* being let in on the ground floor, with a vengeance. Everyone in our shop has heard of that elevator, of course. But you could count the men on one hand who have actually ridden in it.

I was so startled, I didn't even think it strange that Carey had called Daphne by her first name. Or that she should be in on the secret, as well as Ray. Very much in, judging by the way she pressed the middle panel of the south wall. The whole section slid open, like an offstage whisper in melodrama, revealing the wire cage of an old French *ascenseur.* Carey must have been using that lift to smuggle people into his sanctum since before the Armistice. . . . Well, at least I knew how Ray and Daphne had come in without my noticing.

WE CREAKED down that sixteen-story shaft without a word. There was another snugly-hidden door at the bottom, opening behind a stack of newsprint rolls. We stepped out on the mezzanine, one-hundred percent deserted now the presses were waiting for an edition, dodged down a little stair to the mail-room, and went out the side lobby to the street.

Ray's coupe was parked right where the senator's limousine had waited a half-hour before. Daphne unlocked the door, and hopped nonchalantly in beside the wheel.

"He's driving out to Newark himself,

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the moment he comes down," she said. "The watchman will protect me, Jack, if you really want to make your deadline."

Then she crossed her legs and moved over—an invitation only a graduate rewrite man could resist.

"Have fun in Florida," I said, backing up fast. "Careful Ray doesn't work you too hard."

"Don't you read the *Star,* Jack? Mr. Ray and I are retiring."

"The day of whose funeral?" I asked, and ran for the main entrance before she had a chance to answer.

Our city room was stripped down to the lobster trick when I dove for my desk. Mac was still on hand, of course, glowering at a mess of dispatches. He came to stand behind me when I started chattering my keys. When he saw Carey's name in my opening paragraph, he went back to the bull-pen without a word. . . . It was almost twelve-thirty when Ike grabbed my last take, but I'd made the press with three minutes leeway.

Dan Crowell was back at his desk now, brooding over a blank sheet in his machine, while he waited for a lead to hit him. It gave me a fine feeling, watching someone with a story to write and knowing I'd sent up my last for a month. Five weeks, if the boss came through.

In fact, I felt fine enough to call Trudy. She must have pounced on the phone with the first ring.

"Still mad?" I asked.

"What bar are you calling from?"

"Be reasonable, precious. This is the office. Listen to the men at work."

"I can hear someone snoring at your elbow."

"That's Dan Crowell, thinking." I passed the phone across a desk to Dan. "Convince the lady, Columbia."

"Hello, Mrs. Jordan," said Dan. "Can you give me a good lead on the Miramar opening? Your husband was there with me for an hour, and—"

I snatched the phone back. "Well, why not? You hadn't called, and a man must do something with his time."

"Why didn't you try coming home?"

"The Jordans are proud men," I said. "They go only where they are welcome."

"Why don't you try coming home now?"

"Is that an invitation, or a command?"

But I was talking to a dead wire.

I was out of that office in thirty seconds. What's more, I took a taxi home. The *Queen of Bermuda's* motors were already purring honeymoon in my ears. Our second, of course. But most honest married couples will admit that's the honeymoon they enjoyed most.

SPEAKING of honest married couples, we know several dozens here in New York. Trudy went to Barnard, you see, and a lot of my class came down from New Haven and are still hanging on by their toenails. Most of them still play bridge for a tenth, spend one-third of their income on rent, and go without vitamins to dress like the boss.

Trudy and I are about the only stormy petrels in our crowd. We happen to be the sort of married couple who prefer to sleep in Murphy beds, and spend what's left on books and boats. Ever notice how much more the great city means to you, if you can get out of it regularly?

Trudy was sitting on one of those Murphy beds when I came panting up the stairs—doing a good job of pretending she hadn't been crying. After you've been married a few years, you get to know when a good hug says more than a thousand words. When she hugged me back, with interest, I knew the dove of peace had flown right up that stair ahead of me. Even when she started sniffing at my lapel, I wasn't worried. When your conscience is really clean, you can talk your way out of anything.

"You smell of mignonette," she said.

"So would you, if you'd just been in the boss' private elevator with a blonde."

"The same one?"

"The one and only Daphne, the toast of the city room."

"Did you stall between floors?"

"No more than I'm stalling now."

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She put her hand in mine, and smiled. Lord knows why she should have believed me this time, but she did. I think my vacation began officially at that moment. Less than twenty minutes ago, I'd been hammering a typewriter at the *Star*. Now the paper and all it stood for—from celebrity ribbing to covering three-alarm fires in the snow—was as far off and hard to remember as your first day at school.

"Let's eat, sweetheart," I said. "I just remembered that I went without dinner."

"So did I," said Trudy. "Isn't it dreadful, what love will do to a respectable married woman?"

"Shut up and get your hat. I think the dog-wagon is still open."

The phone had been ringing for some time. I answered it while Trudy dove into the wardrobe.

"If it's that hussy," she said, "let me handle her."

"It's Mac." I kept my voice steady, with an effort.

"Tell him to peddle his own papers for awhile."

"I can't, Trudy," I said, hanging up slowly. "He needs my advice on a story—for the last edition."

"What kind of story?"

"Front page," I said. "Carey was found dead five minutes ago. On the floor of a mail truck, in our alley."

CHAPTER VI

FRIDAY MORNING: 2:00

A BELLEVUE ambulance was parked at our mail-room chutes when my taxi drove up to the *Star;* there were radio cars at the curb, too, and cops at every door. Purely from force of habit, I started to ask who had been hurt.

Then I heard the deep throb of the presses, going full blast on the extra. I put my police card in my hand, and headed for the lobby. It does give you a turn, showing your police-card to get into your own office.

Fortunately, a watchman I knew was on duty at the elevators. They weren't letting strange newspapermen past the ground floor tonight, and there was a whole covey of them buzzing in that lobby. Someone I knew made a grab for my arm, but I just shook my head sorrowfully and hurried on. I couldn't help smiling to myself, when I saw how Mac was fighting for a beat on the death of his own publisher.

The lobster trick sat gray-faced around the copy-desks, looking like something left over from the old Eden Musee, now they'd broken their backs to get out the extra. Ike took me in to Mac. Our city editor was sitting in a heap, trying his best to look nonchalant. It was the first time I'd seen him look pale—really shocked, I mean, and not quite sure of his next move.

"We'll be on the street in ten minutes," he said. "How's that for service?"

His voice seemed to come from a long ways off—a frail, old man's voice. Mac had always been ageless as a dynamo, too. I think that tired whisper shocked me more than the news. I could take the thought of Carey's death almost in my stride; Carey was more an heirloom than a man to me. But I was really fond of Mac.

I sat down without being asked in what the *Star's* cubs call the witness chair. The seat I'd occupied a thousand times, ever since I was a cub myself. We sat looking at each other without speaking. The quiet in the city room was so intense it hurt. No matter who has turned in his checks, a shop should never be as quiet as that.

"Why aren't you asking me questions?" he said, finally.

"What shall I ask first?"

"How it happened. Just so I can tell you to go to hell."

I got up. "I'll read it in the extra, if you prefer."

"Sit down, Jack. I've got to talk to someone, before Hurlbut gets back from the top floor."

That really opened my eyes. "So Lieutenant Hurlbut is handling things?"

"Could they do less for us?"

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"I'm just beginning to get a perspective on this," I said.

"All right, Jack, I'll begin at the beginning. Carey fell, or was pushed, from that top-floor window, at five minutes to one."

"Who told you?"

"Shut up and listen. You know, of course, that Dan Crowell is supposed to carry on with your assignments while you're away. Hurlbut's working on him upstairs, now. Dan was the last person to get a glimpse of the boss—before it happened."

"You promised to begin at the beginning," I said.

MAC ground out his cigarette. "I hope I'm not as tired as I sound. I couldn't be. . . . You left Carey and Ray together up there, didn't you?"

"Yes."

"Remember when?"

"Of course I remember. About twenty minutes before the second mail. Twelve-fifteen, maybe."

"Well, Ray came downstairs shortly after, got into his car with Daphne, and started for Newark. I've just phoned the airport. He was taking off for Florida while the call went through."

"Then the boss was alone when—"

"At fifteen to one, he phoned down for you. When I said Dan was taking over, he told me to send him up instead. Seems he wanted to add something to your story for the last edition. . . . Dan found Carey elbow-deep in Ray's manuscript. The boss told him to sit down and take notes; but before Dan could get set, there was a tap on the wall. Evidently, someone had come up in that damned private elevator. Someone Carey was expecting, judging by the way he shooed Dan downstairs again.

"When Dan reported this to me, I told him to wait for the boss to call him back. He had been at his desk perhaps ten minutes, when a hustler from the mail-room came jittering into this office. Carey had just nose-dived through the roof of a truck—"

I remembered how I'd stood at the boss' window. The distant hum of activity in the alley. The sheer drop, past the glow of the restaurant, the blank windows of daytime offices, the cold blue glare of the composing room. . . . Mac was continuing:

"Carey had fallen from his office window at five to one, almost on the second. You know how those mail-trucks are clocked when they come in from the terminals? This one had just backed up for a fresh load when it happened They hadn't thrown in more than two or three bundles."

"He died instantly, of course?"

"Dashed out his brains on his own newsprint," said Mac. "We've pictures to prove it. The sort of pictures even a tabloid wouldn't run."

"Go on," I said.

"I can't. Those are all the facts we have."

"What'd you do, after you saw the body?"

"Went for that private elevator on the hot-foot, of course. It was exactly where I expected to find it—on the mezzanine. Whoever used it last hadn't even bothered to close the door."

"Didn't the watchmen notice who—?"

"The second mail was going out full blast. All our watchmen had their hands full, keeping people out of the way of the trucks. You could have led an elephant in the side entrance without being noticed."

"Apparently, you knew where to look for the lift. Have you ever ridden in it?"

"Of course I knew where to look. Carey rode me down in it a year ago, after a conference. Operated the thing himself."

I took a deep breath. "You said you'd take my head off if I asked who. I'll just ask why."

"Three guesses."

"The diary?"

"Swept clean from the boss' desk. The only thing in the place that had been touched, so far as we know now."

"Would it hurt your feelings too much if I asked what you think?"

"Not at all," said Mac. "So far, I haven't."

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"Then why call me in after hours?"

"In the faint hope that you could think for me—aloud."

"May I listen in, Jack?" said Hurlbut, from the doorway. "It'll save us both time."

REMEMBER my mentioning the quiet? Hurlbut was part of it, including his Indian-soft walk, his gentle whisper. I've tangled horns with him for years now, and never heard him raise his voice. Yet everyone who bumps against him, from district men to Mac himself, knows when that whisper means business. As for the lieutenant's connection with the Homicide Bureau—well, he still looked like a Ph.D. student who had gone slumming to get notes for his dissertation.

"Sorry, Lieutenant," I said, shaking hands as though I meant it. "All I know it what you read in the papers."

"Let's go upstairs together, just to make sure."

He was in action now, all right. I could tell by the silky way he talked of nothing in particular while we rode upstairs. By his "after you" gesture at Carey's office door. He was giving me a chance to open up, of course; and feeling tougher by the minute as I kept my mouth shut tight.

Flashlights were going off in the sanctum, and two of Hurlbut's finest were still hard at it with measuring tape. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw one of them sit down quietly in a corner as we entered, and flip open a shorthand notebook.

"Notice anything we missed, Jack? Anything important?"

It wasn't a spot for violence at all. I looked at the upset blotter on the empty desk top; Carey's overturned armchair; a ripped portiere on the wide-opened casement windows. Surely the big boss would walk in any moment now, and send them all about their business. . . . One of the smudged diary sheets had been left behind on the floor. I bent to pick it up—just to see how fast they were. Detectives were anchored to both my elbows before I could get my nose below the level of Carey's inkwell. Hurlbut waved them back.

"Can you identify that page?"

I took a real look this time. It certainly came from the same typewriter as that frontispiece I'd glimpsed an hour ago; and the hentracks were in the same hand. The page was apparently a chapter ending. All it contained was ten words:

and may they all, living and dead, R.I.P.

"Yes or no?" murmured Hurlbut.

"It looks the same, Lieutenant."

"Can't you be sure, after reading the thing from beginning to end?"

"Explain, Mac," I said.

Mac explained, patiently, that no one had been permitted a glimpse of that diary before tonight. Hurlbut arched his brows.

"The usual, Eddie," he said.

Edwards, who is a dick after the old pattern, took over grimly. The same old where-when-and-why questions. What I thought when I got the news from Mac. What my conclusions were now, if any. Hurlbut had gone to the window. You'd have sworn his thoughts were miles removed from the routine examination. But I'd known him long enough to see he didn't need shorthand to remember my answers.

TWENTY minutes later I was crossing Times Square with a copy of our extra under my arm. I had said that I knew nothing, and they'd believed me—much too quickly for my peace of mind. I'd liked even less the way Hurlbut shook hands and wished me a pleasant voyage to Bermuda.

The extra was a crackerjack job of hurry-up reporting, and added nothing to the facts I already had. In the taxi going home, I sat staring at Carey's picture—a first-class likeness, taken a good twenty years ago when he still dyed his hair. I still felt nothing beyond a slight, but definite headache.

Then I looked out the back window and realized the law was following m home. It didn't shock me much. By tha

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time, I was too tired to be surprised at anything.

Just to make it easy for Hurlbut's boys, I told my driver to let me out at the corner. The car stopped too, a little ways down Second Avenue; but I heard the gears mesh again, almost before I'd started walking.

My brownstone is only four doors from the corner, and I took my time getting out my key. The car loafed by, backed up in the dead end, and loafed west again—a big, innocent-looking straight eight, the sort of watchdog that can stay on anyone's tail-light, even if he's doing ninety.

And I wasn't doing ninety.

I didn't wait to check on where they'd park, or what arrangement they'd make for watching my door tonight. Hurlbut thought I knew something I wasn't telling —that was a big enough thought to sleep on.

TO BE CONTINUED NEXT WEEK

Melody for Milk

SWING it, maestro! Time for the baby to be fed. A little sweet jive, not too hot, while we soften up the morning bottle.

Not a gag, exactly. It seems that when milk gets into the stomach it forms curds—and the harder the curds, the longer it takes the milk to digest. So the idea is to soften up the curds. It's done not with mirrors but with music.

A patent was granted last year to a Mr. Edward W. Smith of Melrose, Mass., for a gimmick which softens milk by passing sound waves through it. First you separate the milk from the cow. Then you separate the cream from the milk until there's only one-half of one percent of butterfat left. At this point you're ready for the hep-cats, who should have been tuning up meanwhile in a corner of the barn.

Now take the skim milk and pass it through a chamber one-sixteenth of an inch wide, one wall of which is really a metallic diaphragm in disguise. Electromagnetic force causes this diaphragm to vibrate; the waves set up pass through the milk; and the milk, appropriately moved by these sweet vibrations, becomes soft and drinkable as anything. Or almost anything.

The last step is to pour the cream back into the milk. The cream, apparently, doesn't resent being left out of the jam session, and mixes nice as you please.

—*Crockett Cooper*

Many Never Suspect Cause Of Backaches

This Old Treatment Often Brings Happy Relief

Many sufferers relieve nagging backache quickly, once they discover that the real cause of their trouble may be tired kidneys.

The kidneys are Nature's chief way of taking the excess acids and waste out of the blood. Most people pass about 3 pints a day or about 3 pounds of waste.

Frequent or scanty passages with smarting and burning shows there may be something wrong with your kidneys or bladder.

An excess of acids or poisons in your blood, when due to functional kidney disorders, may be the cause of nagging backache, rheumatic pains, leg pains, loss of pep and energy, getting up nights, swelling, puffiness under the eyes, headaches and dizziness.

Don't wait! Ask your druggist for Doan's Pills, used successfully by millions for over 40 years. They give happy relief and will help the 15 miles of kidney tubes flush out poisonous waste from your blood. Get Doan's Pills.

(ADV.)

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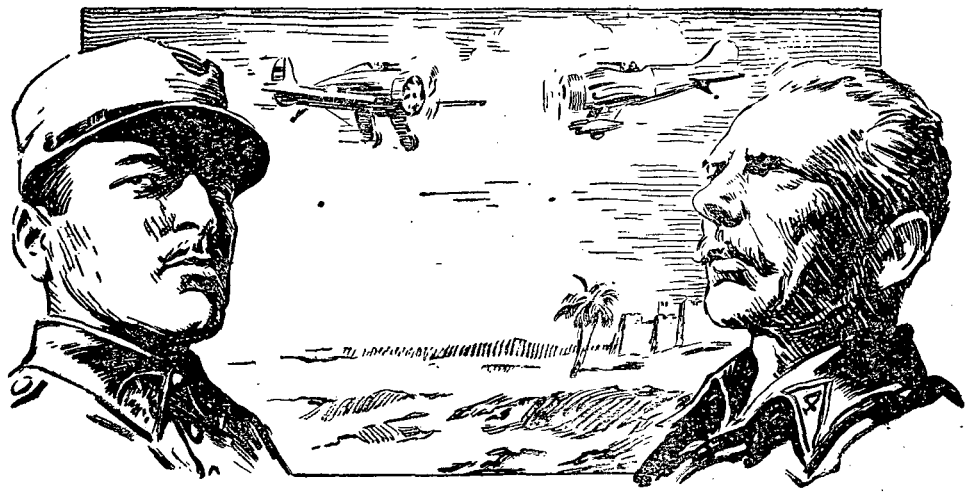

The Blood Call

By GEORGES SURDEZ

Author of "Long Live the Emperor!", "The Coat of M'sieu Picart", etc.

Take this money, Legionnaire, and get back to your drinking. For on a September afternoon in 'seventeen, you killed my brother. . . .

THAT night, a battalion of the Foreign Legion just returned from the advanced posts along the Saharan border would spend the accumulated pay of several months in the reserved quarter of a Moroccan mountain town.

A wise administration had taken the customary precautions, members of other corps had been forbidden to leave their barracks on that day, the risk of a serious riot had been cut down to a minimum. Nevertheless, armed patrols were kept busy maintaining a semblance of order.

"There will be nothing new for you to see," my friend Pierre had told me.

"After a long stretch of loneliness and privations, men will react along certain very defined lines when brought back in contact with comparative civilization. Flaubert's description of the Carthaginian mercenaries in the gardens of Hamilcal holds true, if you dress your chaps in khaki and put them in tawdry surroundings.

"I'll go with you in uniform. I admit that they may not have as strong a consideration for bones and cuticle as you have been accustomed to and that a lone civilian might very soon collect a black eye."

He was a captain of aviation. Consequently, Legionnaires would respect him; for Legionnaires, traditionally, are friendly to spahis and aviators, antagonistic to *tirailleurs*, artillerymen and sundry others. The dim motivatings of this state of affairs would fill sixty large volumes.

And even out of uniform, Pierre would have been a sufficient bodyguard because of a certain feline hardness in his slender, tall body that fighting men recognized.

He bore a name that had been famous in France for a number of months. His brother had been an aviator whose name had appeared often in the official war-news at one time, as often as the names of Guynemer, Dorme, Nungesser, Archinard and Fonck.

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But the years had passed and outside of the Army there were few who recalled a once illustrious man.

In Pierre's quarters, there was the original of a painting published in an illustrated magazine. There was also a framed strip of canvas bearing a black Maltese Cross, with a scrawl: "To Pierre: The Twenty-Fifth." It was the gift of a fond brother to an adoring youngster fretting war years in a boarding school. When I remarked upon the similarity of names first, to get him to talking, Pierre had said quietly, "My brother."

That was all. He could have talked ten hours, gone into a thousand details without adding anything to the impact of his pride. His brother had been killed in action, and I understood that for Pierre the World War had had one hero.

I shut up, because after all there are things to be respected. Much later, he had given me a log-book, with the laconic remark:

"Covers about six months. Maybe you can glean a few notes from it."

It was like an accolade for me. And we used first names after that.

PIERRE had been right. There was nothing new to see. The same old stuff —tanned young men seeking to squeeze happiness out of the moment and getting only sensations. The crowded dives were lonely and pathetic. And the howls of mirth broke off like giant sobs.

There were fights; patrols dragged off belligerent drunks to the lockup. Everybody seemed to be working hard to be able to say, in the future: "Remember the night we hit town after a year down south?"

Pierre and I were walking through a side street, a six-foot width of rough paving between grim walls on which garish paint flaked in the lanterns' light, a funnel of sounds, gramophones blaring, voices roaring songs and curses, a funnel of odors dominated by the reek of cheap cologne. Even the reflections of the street's lights were red in pools of spilled wine.

In an open door, a man was struggling, several hands pushing him outward. The sight of Pierre's uniform startled him, and he lost the struggle, staggered back to hit the other wall, as the door slammed with a thud. He straightened, came to attention and saluted.

He was rather tall, very thin; there was grey hair showing under the *képi,* and his finely featured, dissipated face was lined. Not a youngster, this one: I noted that he wore the Military Medal, the Colonial Cross and a number of campaign badges.

There was drink in him, and he spoke with a marked German accent, although his French was correct.

"I beg your pardon, *mon Capitaine!* My money was picked out of my pockets, and after that they threw me out. The dogs forget that they live by us and off us." Then, as Pierre did not reply, he lurched a step forward, as if to complain more effectively. His voice changed: "All my excuses. I hadn't recognized you."

He seemed about to turn away.

"Legionnaire!" Pierre halted him. He brought out his wallet, took out a sheaf of notes: "Go back in there with money and show them you are not one to be thrown out."

I could see that the meeting had sobered the other. His face was green, as he paled under the sunburn. He was tormented by overwhelming embarrassment.

"Never mind, Captain. I'm going back to barracks. Thanks."

Pierre persisted gently.

"A man like you cannot be thrown out of a place like that. You must go back, do what you wish and leave as you please. You understand that."

There was a long silence. Then the private spoke again as he accepted the money: "Yes, Captain." He saluted again, knocked on the door. When it opened, he showed the notes, entered, vanished without a word of leave-taking to Pierre.

They were acquainted, they had not shaken hands. And the difference in ranks did not explain that, in the French Army.

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"Friend of yours?" I wondered.

He shrugged, smiled faintly.

"No. I'll tell you all about it, otherwise you'll construct a romance about the business. Let's go in somewhere."

We entered a night club in another street, close to the European town, filled with young officers and noncoms. There was an assortment of girls from all countries of Europe, a floor show and rotten champagne at Montmartre prices.

The orchestra pounded lugubriously as Pierre talked.

•

HIS Legion name is Weiniger. I met him first in a small city close to the Riff frontier, where I had charge of the flying field. I was still a lieutenant.

That was three years ago.

My orderly came in one afternoon and said that a Legionnaire wanted to speak to me. He had refused to tell his business, so I sent word to him that I would not receive him.

One has to do that, you know; otherwise there would be a stream of such chaps popping in with the most extravagant stories and suggestions. One is a skilled mechanic and wishes to transfer to the aviation; another has invented a wireless control for dropping bombs.

In other words, anything and everything to see an officer of another corps, talk his ears off, get a few francs for going away.

They are more careful with their own officers who can punish them directly. But they know very well that an outside officer would feel rather mean, petty, to report them to their company commander. Also, they bank on the prestige of the Legion's name over newcomers. This was a routine case of the sort, I imagined.

But my orderly comes back in a moment: "He insists upon seeing you, Lieutenant. He said to tell you this—it sounds crazy to me—and that you would see him at once: 'September seventh, afternoon.'"

"All right," I agreed, to the orderly's amazement: "Bring him here."

As the stranger outside had expected, the words had had a quick effect on me. My brother was killed on September seventh, 'seventeen, at two-thirty or so. That chap had guessed that I would have looked up all the details and that date and time would be clear in my mind.

I can tell you that an idea that has just occurred to you, unbelievable though it was, flashed through my mind; and that I was easier, calmer when I saw him come in and realized that I had never set eyes on him before.

It was the man we saw drunk a little while ago. He was sober, and despite the baggy capote, he appeared rather dignified. He saluted, and introduced himself, according to regulations:

"Legionnaire Weiniger, Franz."

"What do you wish, Legionnaire?"

I was intensely curious.

"I'll tell you later. It is important to know, first, that I am a German, former officer of aviation. I shot down your brother."

I did not believe that. My brother had been well known, and probably a number of men have claimed to have defeated him in his last fight. I smiled faintly and framed a question that would knock him from his assurance. But he smiled also, and spoke rapidly.

"Our formation was fleeing before superior forces, according to general instructions for that sector, when, above Orfeuil, my motor started to miss. So I shoved over eastward, hoping the French would pass me to pursue the rest. But one of their leading machines swerved at once and followed me.

"He caught up with me over Marvaux; we fooled about a bit—and he put a row of holes in my right wing, passed right over me and kept between me and the German lines. I finally had to chance it, headed northwest. I shot him down near Bouconville, and saw him crash. I ascertained later that he had dropped into the Bois de Forge. I headed north then, and narrowly escaped two of your machines right above Mouron. . . ."

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I HAD taken much trouble and time to find out just how my brother had been killed; I had visited his comrades, his chiefs. Point by point this man's account checked with what I had learned. It would have been foolish to think that a man in Morocco, after several years, could have discovered all of that to deceive me for any purpose.

I told him his real name then. And he snapped open a little leather wallet he had kept in his left hand. This he held for my inspection. Again, it checked.

"I believe you, *monsieur,*" I said. "What do you wish of me?"

His eyes fastened on mine and he sneered.

"So what?" I was growing angry. "Do you come in here expecting congratulations?"

"You loved your brother?" he asked, smiling broadly.

I wanted to rise and throw him out. Then I realized that he must be a bit cracked. I did not wonder about his being in the Legion—after the end of the War, Germany was in a mess for his kind. There was a man in the Third Regiment who had commanded a cruiser. Yes, and was a private of the Legion, at fifty and some years.

Nevertheless, although war is an impersonal business, you can realize how I felt at facing the man who had actually—you see?

And at that moment, it could not occur to me to think of the thirty-odd men my brother had sent to their deaths before this chap had ended his career. He was smiling, questioning me with that queer smirk spread across his thin, Prussian mug, and I was furious. When a man is faced with the unexpected, he seldom thinks—he merely feels.

"As a former officer, you presumably have sufficient education to understand that this visit is in poor taste. You may leave."

But he stood there, not lowering his eyes.

"I understood you had some Corsican blood," he said. He kept on smiling.

"What concern is it of yours?"

"Your desire for vengeance is not very strong."

The foolishness of that remark brought me to a calmer state. I understood that this chap was suffering from that fabulous malady of the Foreign Legion, the *cafard,* which might be called truculent depression. He needed to do something startling to attract attention to himself, to pull out of the anonymous mass. Immediately, I decided not to give him the satisfaction of a scene.

"You are somewhat confused in your folklore, Legionnaire," I informed him. "The death of a relative in action against a national enemy does not create a vendetta."

"He thought he had me," Weiniger resumed. "I started to go down—then looped, and my bullets found him. He jerked back, and I could see him as I went by, waving my hand—"

"My patience is at an end," I told him: "Get out."

"Want of guts?" he wondered aloud. "Or afraid?"

I hope that I shall never face such a situation again. My hands were tied by my rank and I kept thinking the chap had gone mad. He would shout if I called in men to throw him out, and I could not do it myself for several reasons. One was that I was an officer on duty; the other was that if I once started to hit him I should probably not halt until he was unconscious. Say what you wish, it isn't all impersonal!

"What are you trying to do?" I wondered.

"You wish to kill me. You must wish it." He stared at me, nodded as he caught my glance. "I want to give you the chance."

"How? A duel?"

I was beginning to be swept by the same obscure madness that he radiated so strongly.

He nodded.

"A sort of duel," he agreed.

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YOU must understand that the odds were not even. Weiniger risked nothing but his life. Should he kill me—and there was a chance that he would, for he must be a proficient shot with any type of firearm—he would be tried, of course.

But the cause of the duel would be taken into account; a court composed of officers would not wish to appear to avenge a French officer, and he would be given a suspended sentence for justifiable homicide.

On the other hand, I could not expect the same leniency. If I wounded or killed him, I would be forced to resign from the army. If an officer cannot gamble with subordinates, still less can he fight with them. It would be a scandal, and I would be a marked man. I would have been proved reckless and irresponsible, so that the aviation companies would not be eager to take me in.

"Afraid?" Weiniger asked sharply.

"No. How can it be arranged?"

Put yourself in my place. My brother—and a direct challenge. At my agreement, his whole attitude changed. The insolence vanished from his face.

"You are concerned about your commission, Lieutenant, aren't you? Well, my plan will take care of that." To mark the change in relationships—for a man who accepts a duel accepts his opponent as an equal—he removed his *képi,* lighted a cigarette.

"How?"

"You have four N.D. single-seaters here, Lieutenant. We—"

"You are suggesting a duel in the air?" I was amazed.

"What would be more suitable?" He shrugged. "I don't mean that we should start openly. But let us presume that you have two planes on the line, warmed up, ready to go. I have already arranged for a pal to give me a start. I shove the regular pilot aside, I get in—and you naturally pursue me—"

"And risk a few hundred thousand francs of the material trusted to me?"

"I have seen two cracked up on routine training," he pointed out. "When Government money is involved, why worry about petty sums when there is so much graft and waste in other ways?"

He was not wholly wrong. What he suggested could be managed easily enough. If his real identity became known, there would be astonishment at the coincidence; naturally. But astonishment is not legal proof.

Unless you are a flyer yourself, you cannot comprehend the temptation. I have accomplished dangerous missions a few times, but I had never met another aviator in a fair contest. You always wonder how you would come out. But even as I played with the idea, its impossibility struck me.

"If you won, Legionnaire, what would you do?"

"I would make for Algeciras or Gibraltar. I believe I could make it."

"There's enough fuel to do that, yes." I nodded. "In other words, you are trying to obtain my complicity in deserting from the Legion? And you would take the latest type machine of ours and land on foreign soil. As a French officer, I am placed in an odd position."

He grinned and shrugged.

"YOU should have more confidence in yourself. I give you my word that I would fight until a decision was reached. Then, in either case, there would be nothing for you to worry about. I am really giving you a great advantage, as you have had experience with such machines."

That made me think, and I was suddenly overcome with pity.

"How long ago did you fly?"

"About seven years ago. For the Turks against the Greeks."

"Then I refuse."

"Why?"

"Because I cannot help you commit suicide. Those machines have a ground speed of over three hundred."

I was sincere. I had seen men who had been splendid flyers get into a modern

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plane after years out of the trade. "It would take you thirty hours to get used to taking off and landing—and I cannot supply you with a machine for practice."

"I know what you mean, Lieutenant," he said." I saw a good flyer kill himself in 1919; he had been a prisoner in Russia for two years and undertook to fly without much practice. But I have mentally prepared myself for—"

Then he saw that I had come to a decision.

"I'd be willing to chance it," he concluded.

I shook my head.

"No. I am at your disposal in any other way you may suggest."

He grew very embarrassed.

"No, Lieutenant. I have nothing against you. I wanted a chance, no matter how slim, to escape. To desert, if you prefer. In four days, it will be too late." He spoke as if he had told me the whole story: "I heard she had been widowed as I heard about her coming marriage. And I have seven months yet to serve."

"Perhaps a cable—"

"Useless, Lieutenant." He said no more about that. "I must apologize for the things I said, Lieutenant. I wished to irritate you into doing as I wished. I lied. I never saw his face. When he started to fall, I was only too glad to get a chance to get away. He was a fine flyer."

His voice broke, faltered: "I dropped a wreath—"

That also had I been told by my brother's comrades.

"He stayed in the Legion, reenlisted," Pierre concluded. "Whatever his reason for wanting to desert, he must have told the truth about that limit of four days. He never tried to desert after. He is a fine, a brave soldier. I have asked his chiefs. But he is addicted to booze, like so many of his comrades."

He looked at his watch and suggested leaving. The night club was emptying and the streets outside were quiet.

"He had killed your brother, Pierre," I said. "And you wanted, quite naturally, to kill him. Yet, just a few minutes ago, I saw you give him money."

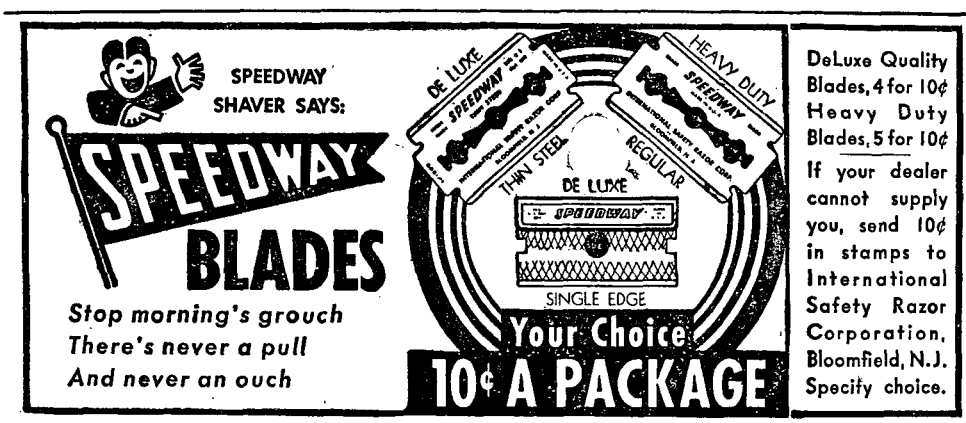
He looked at me with surprise, then explained with an expression of great patience, as if talking to a small child: "But don't you see that not having done the first, I am compelled to do the other?"

I nodded vaguely, not really seeing at all.

"Look," he said—still patiently. "It was my brother whom he shot down. A great flyer; a fine man. Am I to see his victor a tramp, thrown out of dives, penniless? Was my brother worthy of no better foe?"

And then I understood. By preserving the prestige of the victor, Pierre was honoring the memory of the vanquished. That was his logic.

And he was right.



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Big Gun From Texas

By RALPH R. PERRY

Author of "Shark Master", "Gun Swift", etc.

Bronco Bowdeen might shake hands with a killer or slap down a sheriff with equal calm. But a spur gash on a pony's flank would bring out his six-gun quicker than a snake's wink—for Bronc was a one-man S.P.C.A. of the range. A complete short novel

CHAPTER I

SLUGS FOR STRANGERS

WITH a scream a dum-dummed slug cut the breeze between Bronco Bowdeen and his brother Plug. Amid the grass at the top of a rounded hillock three hundred and fifty yards away rose the blue-gray smokepuff of a buffalo gun.

"That cutbank—on your right—git there!" Bronc rapped out.

He reined his mare as though to stand and fight, snatching a Winchester from the saddle boot. His brother whirled a black gelding and streaked for cover, riding Indian fashion. Their teamwork was instant, perfect.

Despite Plug's head start they reached the cutbank abreast. Bronco Bowdeen's mare was a magnificent three-year-old, of the true Montana steel-dust strain. A blue-gray coat, sleek as polished gunmetal, without spot or star of any lighter color. The black was a good horse, yet she overhauled him as a greyhound might overtake a cocker spaniel. Bronc rode erect in the saddle, offering a target until the bank hid the mare.

"Hold Lucy!" he ordered, tossed the reins, and scrambled to the rim of the bank just as the second slug wailed overhead.

It was a low bank, barely deep enough to protect the horses. Fifty yards in either direction it fattened into a wash too shallow to conceal a rabbit. Behind, the plains were bald as a head. In front, the Wyoming range sloped gently to a grassy ridge where the gun smoke drifted. Beyond the ridge rose two columns of thick black smoke. The smoke that a burning cabin makes.

"Mexican stand-off. They can't get ahead. We can't get nowhere," Bronc remarked. He was a rangy youngster of twenty-four, with brown hair and reckless gray-green eyes. A leather chin strap, with a carved horn button, held on his hat. He glanced at the sun. Ten o'clock.

"Got any water, Plug?"

"Bronc, I done drunk it all!"

Plug Bowdeen looked up at his older brother like a mastiff that has offended, without intention. His face was open as a watch—round blue eyes set in a round countenance, with vertical wrinkles of worry between the flaxen brows. He was short and bow-legged. A bowie slash seamed his left cheek from eye to chin, yet he was obviously a peaceful man—up to a point. He said worriedly:

"That posse must have found a short-cut."

"Naw! Not after the way I blinded our trail the last time," Bronc contradicted.

"You blinded it before. They've followed us mighty near four hundred miles just the same."

"This time I was extra careful. It's funny, though. No posse except this one ever read a trail I blotted."

"Bronc, a hombre that ain't satisfied with the hole a .50 caliber slug makes is plumb pizen mad. Them bullets was notched to tear us into little bits. It follows," Plug argued doggedly, "that that's our posse up there. Except for killin' a

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Frantically the punchers fought the bunkhouse fire

woman"—Plug's voice hardened at the very mention of crime so awful—"nothing could make hombres that mad but stealing a mare like Lucy there."

"I did not steal Lucy!"

"Ain't that posse chased us plumb across the territory? Ain't there reward notices everywhere with *Horse Thief* on them in big letters?"

"Sure! An' what of it?" Bronc Bowdeen demanded sharply. "It's our Wyoming names that are on that reward notice. Not our right ones. Them notices call us the Morgan brothers."

"I SCARCELY care what name I git hanged under," said Plug doggedly. "I've backed your play since I was a button, and I ain't complainin' none now, and I'm plumb sorry I drunk all the water. But, Bronc, facts is facts, an—"

Bronc Bowdeen slid down the cutbank.

"Facts!" he snorted. "Plug, yuh aggrevate me. Taking Lucy ain't horse-stealin'. Why, Connors himself couldn't think—"

"Well, Connors owned Lucy—"

"He did not!" Bronc retorted. With gentle fingers he parted the silky mane of the steel-dust, and pointed to a tiny, concealed brand.

"Lazy S," Bronc declared. "A Texas brand. Connors branded Rafter C, in Wyoming. Didn't he?"

"Yep, but maybe he had a bill of sale—"

"I parted this mane just this way. I looked him in the eye," said Bronc Bowdeen. "Connors' face told me different, Plug. He got this horse from *real* horse thieves. His title to her ain't more legal than mine—and not as good with any right thinking hombre. Ain't Connors an onery, sneakin' coyote?"

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"Yep."

"Did he pay us for breaking his broomtails, like he promised?"

"We left kind of a sudden. But no, he didn't," Plug admitted.

"How many different brands were on those hundred horses?"

"Damn near a hundred, but—"

"But, hell! Connors is a mean thief. An' Lucy is thoroughbred. A pure-bred horse is the noblest creature God ever made," said Bronc Bowdeen. Over his reckless face came a look as far off, as far flung, as the wide sweep of the horizon.

"A good woman is nobler."

"The noblest *dumb* creature," Bronc corrected impatiently. "I say it ain't right for an onery, ill-bred man to own a thoroughbred horse. I aim to prevent it. If the man has a bill of sale I can't, because the law is plumb prejudiced and blind. But against Connors and ary hombre like him I can, and I will. Let's see any deputy or posse stop me!"

Plug Bowdeen glanced in the direction of the ridge.

"Brother, you're four years younger than me," said Bronc Bowdeen. "When mother was dyin' I promised I'd look after you. I've promised your Sadie the same. You were asleep in Connors' bunkhouse the night I took Lucy. Even he can't claim you're guilty. You just joined me on the trail later."

"But Bronc!" Plug broke in protestingly.

"Hush up. I've gotten you trapped, Plug. Whoever's on the ridge can get us. I remember the moon rises early tonight. Maybe this is the finish, and I don't want you to go down thinking I'm a horse thief and a tough hombre. You put your hands high, and ride out there."

"Now, Bronc!" the younger brother expostulated.

"One of us has got to. We're cotched."

"Then you say which. As usual, Bronc."

A smile crossed the round, serious face, sudden as the beam of sunlight that breaks through an overcast sky.

"I promised my Sadie to keep you as close t'earth as possible. An' I never called yuh tough hombre. Them three jaspers you've shot was all already drawin' on yuh. Those killings were plumb legal."

Bronc fondled the mane of the steeldust, his face sharp with thought.

"Whichever goes must ride the black," he decided. "I won't have Lucy hurt. . . . Plug, you speak out. I've got to know if you really favor what I'm working to get. A ranchhouse for you and Sadie, with real curtains at the windows. No flour sackin'. And a bunkhouse for me, where I see the horses rollin' in the dust when I lift my head of mornings. Where I can tell myself:

" 'There's foals of the best blood to be had in the whole West.' "

Bronc stroked the forehead of the steeldust. He said:

"Like her. I— Plug, I admit I aim to keep Lucy at our ranch long enough to breed. Maybe that ain't plumb honest, but afterward I'll take her back to her real owner at the Lazy S. Ain't I always taken any horses I've borrowed back to the real owners, Plug? I can't afford to buy the breeding stock I want. Our Two B's back-to-back has got to be the finest horse ranch in the West. I just can't help bein' particular, Plug. You do back me. but do yuh crave to?"

"Shucks, you sure fly off the handle." Plug grinned. "Sure I do. You're my brother. What you want, I help get. That's whatever. 'Course, Bronc, me and Sadie would like to get married, and your way's kind of slow. Three years at it, and just three colts to show. It ain't exactly profitable, but we savvy why, an—"

"Ride out, you!" yelled a voice from the ridge.

BRONC BOWDEEN swung into the saddle of the black and spurred it from the shelter of the cutbank while his slower-witted brother blinked. His hands were up, and he moved toward the rise at a slow trot.

As he reached the crest the muzzle of a

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buffalo gun lifted from a dense clump of grass like a stiff iron snake.

"Yuh damned Maxon gunnie. Yuh horse killer!" snarled a furious voice. "D'ja hear that slug sing?"

"Plenty," Bronc admitted. "Who's Maxon?"

"Yuh know damn well! Your stallion-murderin', Eastern-hired boss! Git—an' tell him I got a slug notched for him."

Bronc looked straight off across the range, without turning his head. The fury in that voice would be matched by the quivering of a finger already tight on a trigger. Very quietly he said:

"I'll carry your word. But me and my brother are strangers. We're drifting through."

"Yuh lie! That's Sligo Maxon saddle stock you're forkin'! You had the moxie to come here to preempt my homestead, figurin' I'd run off. I'm goin' to kill Sligo Maxon and Jeff Barnes first!"

"You know that steel-dust mare?" Bronc asked softly.

Sitting in the saddle, he was high enough to look over the crest of the ridge. Beyond were the smoking embers of two small shacks—nesters' shacks, built near the homestead line, and only a hundred feet apart. Behind one was a corral, with a sorrel horse lying dead. An attempt had been made to farm the other. Just outside the remains of a barbed wire fence was a freshly turned patch of earth, six feet by three.

Near the grave a girl was huddled, her face in her hands. The sun gleamed from blond hair. She looked young. Her dress was ripped to tatters.

"No! But they must be from Maxon's cavvy. It's the only one. I just had one standard-bred stallion," the man with the buffalo gun retorted angrily.

Bronc Bowdeen released pent breath in a long sigh. Very slowly he turned, and beckoned his brother to ride up.

"I wasn't dead sure it was 'horse killer' yuh called me," he said. "I'm a horse breeder, stranger. I aim to build a cabin back home like those two were. I don't cotton to horse killers. Nor ornery cattlemen with blooded horses. Stranger, I wish you'd let me and my brother unbuckle our guns, while we talk some."

He turned in the saddle, slowly. From the grass a man his own age rose, suspicious, watchful; ready to shoot, yet half convinced. They waited, measuring one another, until Plug joined them.

As the younger brother topped the ridge, he checked Lucy on a dime. The knife scar on his face turned livid. He said:

"Bronc—she's cryin'!"

He spurred forward, swung from the steel-dust beside the girl, sweeping off his hat. His voice carried upwind to the two on the ridge:

"Ma'am! If I can do anything . . . Ma'am, can't I please help yuh?"

"I guess you two can keep your guns," the nester said. "I'm sorry if I was hasty, stranger. Only—where were you headed for if not here? Except for the spread Maxon manages, there's nothin' south of me but open range."

"Reckon I missed the landmarks," said Bronc easily. "Just what happened here?"

IT WAS a simple story. The man told it squatting by a grave, with the heat from a burned homestead flushing his face. The girl sat with her head bent down, and the tears dried on her face. Plug squatted as close to her as was polite, blue eyes soft, and mouth hard.

She was Jenny Gildersleeve. The nester was Jim Holcombe. They'd planned to marry after Jim had a horse herd build up, and her father had made a crop.

"Just who crippled that standard-bred in the corral, and left it to die?" Bronc interrupted.

"Maxon himself," Jenny said. "Jeff Barnes rode up with three punchers. He called pa to the door and shot him. I jumped out the window and let out for the brush, with lead flyin'—"

"They shot at you, ma'am?" said Plug Bowdeen bleakly.

"Yes." Jenny nodded. "Then they set

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fire to the houses, and Sligo Maxon himself rode in and shot Jim's stallion in the foreleg—"

"Ma'am," said Plug gravely, "had this Jeff Barnes—or Maxon—any reason to raid yuh? On your Bible word, ma'am?"

"No," said Jenny.

"Where were you, Jim?" Bronc asked.

"Off with a posse, chasin' a bank bandit. Masked hombre ridin' a sorrel stallion cleaned out the bank at Harmon here—"

"That's a sorrel stallion there, mister," Bronc remarked.

Jim Holcombe's face went dark red with fury.

"Damn well I know it!" he burst out. "Stranger, the men of this section looked at me slant-eyed, and whispered behind my back I was a bandit, till I was seein' red. I was the masked hombre that bobs up riding a sorrel stallion, robs banks and trains, and plumb disappears. I was poor, and a stranger, so I must be the feller that's put over four holdups in the last three months, since me and Pa Gildersleeve located here. But by jimminy, this time I was in the bank when it was robbed, so Deputy Jones couldn't blame me! I'm honest, an' hard workin' and I been put upon, and now I'm goin' to kill—"

"Sure, Jim. Sure," Bronc soothed. "It's plumb aggravating to be called thief. You was chasin' this bandit—where?"

"Northward. He was ridin' lightning, 'cause we made a fifty mile circle and found nothin'."

"Meet anybody?"

"No."

Bronc flashed a look at Plug, and remarked:

"Trails is easy to blind. Your posse should have been ridin' Sligo's horses."

"Him!" Jim snapped. "Listen, the nesters organized this county. Deputy Jackson Jones ain't having no truck with Eastern cattle syndicates, nor their hired ranch bosses like Sligo Maxon. Stranger, you're kindly intentioned, but I've taken so much, I'm on the prod. You stop off at the Quarter Circle M and tell Maxon and Barnes I'm comin' shootin'—"

"How many punchers they got?"

"A dozen."

"Bet you get shot. Or hanged."

Jim Holcombe sprang up furiously. "You mind your business!"

"Aim to," Bronc answered. He looked at Plug, who nodded emphatically. "This Sligo Maxon is a mighty onery hombre. He deserves killin'. Only you ain't the man to do it."

"Why ain't I? Who's got more right—"

"Plug, you tell him," said Bronc calmly. "That is, Plug, if you're willin'?"

"Bronc, I'm anxious. . . . Jim, you got a girl. A man with a girl to protect, an' cherish can't think of his own feelin's first." The blue eyes in the round face were gravely earnest. "I'm tellin' yuh as a man that's going to raise a family too, pretty soon. With us, duty comes first. You mind Miss Jenny here, and listen to my brother. Ain't that right, Miss Jenny?"

"I wish you would, Jim," Jenny Gildersleeve urged. "You're all I got, Jim. You can—wait a little."

"I'd like yuh to wait two-three days. Jim," Bronc Bowdeen said quietly. "This Maxon—"

"An' this Jeff Barnes," Plug interrupted.

"—is something more than usual onery," Bronc swept on, raising his voice to drown out his brother. "My business is dealin' with his kind, and I crave to get at it. You take Miss Jenny to Harmon, Jim. After three days, you can ride out and get Maxon yourself, if you figure it's needful —or possible. That suit yuh?"

"It suits me," said Jenny Gildersleeve. She brushed blond hair from her eyes, and took Jim by the arm. "You come along with me, Jim. The strangers are right, and friendly."

For a moment Jim Holcombe sat and glowered. The tug on his arm brought him to his feet. He shrugged, and let Jenny lead a wagon in a dugout stable that had escaped the fire.

"Plug, we've got to lay over," Bronc whispered under his breath. "A man onery enough to shoot a horse can't be left owning—"

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"Bronc, you shut up before you make me mad," said the younger brother. "Of course we've got to stay. We can get a pair of skunks without leavin' a nice girl to be an old maid."

CHAPTER II

STANDARD-BRED—AND SWIFT

EARLY in the afternoon Bronc and Plug walked their horses up a slope which was like a low wave in a vast green sea. From the crest they saw the ranch buildings of the Quarter Circle M. It lay in a vast, shallow depression that was a good ten miles from skyline to skyline. Cottonwoods around the ranch told of a spring, but on the slopes there was scarcely as much as a bush. A rider approaching from any direction could be seen a long, long way off.

The bunkhouse and the house were of logs, built in a right angle with the corral completing the square. There was still a stack of hay, close to the end of the bunkhouse and handy to the corral fence.

"Visitors won't surprise Sligo," Bronc remarked dryly. "Were I a horse thief, that's the way I'd locate."

The wrinkle of worry creased Plug's forehead. He muttered:

"It is goin' to be harder than I figured."

"What is?" Bronc demanded sharply.

"Why, one of us asks Sligo for a job, and the other—whichever you say—kind of lingers near the horses. This Jeff Barnes sounds like he was Sligo's foreman, so he goes out to look us over. We sass him until he goes for his gun. Then we shoot him—an' Sligo too if we can—an' hightail it. Only we won't have much start on the rest of the outfit," Plug went on simply. "Still, I reckon Lucy an' the black can keep us ahead—"

"That's your figurin'?"

"Sure. What else you been walkin' the horses for?"

"My God!" Bronc muttered. "That's downright bloodthirsty. That's murder!"

"No such thing—not if I get them riled enough to draw," Plug contradicted. "If 'misbranded liar' don't peeve them, there's fightinger words. I figure—"

"You leave the plannin' to me, like usual," Bronc rapped out. "What the hell, Plug! Sligo and Barnes are Holcombe's meat, not ours."

"Well, yuh sent him to Harmon. Those two killers got to have justice done on 'em."

"Yuh ranny, I'm goin' to send them to Harmon too. They'll come runnin' right up to Jim's six-shooter."

"I s'pose that ain't murder?"

" 'Course not. That's just minding my own business. I can't help it if Sligo and Barnes misunderstand me some," Bronc answered sternly. "Hmm . . . Jim didn't lie none about the size of Sligo's outfit."

A man was visible at every window in the bunkhouse, leaning on the sill, or rolling a cigarette close to the glass, but alert and ready behind the protection of log walls. Three more sauntered out as the riders came within hail.

"A lobo, a coyote, an' just an ordinary hired guntoter," Bronc commented under his breath. "Size up them two in the lead, Plug. Only question is, which one is Sligo? Why, those two even got a mean way of walkin'."

Aloud Bronc hailed: "Hello the house! Can we light down?"

"Guess so," called back the older of the two he had mentioned. "What you want?"

"You Sligo Maxon?"

"What's the difference?"

"He's a damn Yankee," Bronc whispered to his brother. "Answers with a question. An' see them long-pronged Mexican rowels he's wearin'. Hoss punisher an' hoss killer. . . . Why, jobs, mister. Me and my kid brother had to light out from Texas, an' we can sling ropes or guns—"

"You're too late. Got a full crew," Sligo snapped back.

He was a middle-sized, sun-dried, saddle-hardened man with black hair and pale blue eyes, startlingly light against the leathery brown skin. His age was between thirty and forty. Except for the spurs,

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which were the type used by brutal riders who wish to get the utmost from a horse, he had no hallmark of meanness.

The foreman, Jeff Barnes, was different. Barnes was so thin his face was skull-like; his eyes were close-set and red-rimmed, like a weasel's.

BRONC reined Lucy and let himself slouch dolefully in the saddle at Sligo's answer. Plug forged to the front, glaring at Barnes—until his brother kicked him in the leg from behind, where the chaps were no protection.

"Say!" Plug yelled.

"Don't mind him, mister," Bronc cut in mournfully. "He's plumb disappointed. So'm I. Ride all day. Git nothin'."

"You can have supper," Sligo retorted without a smile. "That's a fair mare, stranger."

"Fair?" Bronc exploded. "Best yuh'll ever see!"

"Fair, I said," Sligo answered coldly. "Only middlin'. I figured you might have come here to race her."

"Where'd I get her match?" Bronc boasted.

Sligo laughed, short and sharp as a fox's bark.

"I breed horses, stranger. Got three, maybe four, could beat her in a quarter race."

Bronc flushed. "I think different," he declared, coldly polite. "If you want to race, bring on your mount."

"For what? You ain't got no money."

Bronc shrugged. He thought of the watchful men at the windows, the wide valley. He said:

"I'd be uncomfortable taking your money away. Mister, you've insulted a fine horse. Lucy and me ain't takin' it. I'll race you for nothing, or for beans, or my guns, boots, and saddle."

"Ain't interested."

"Listen, you dried-up polecat," Plug interrupted nastily. "You're going to race, or I'll— Bronc, damn yuh, quit kickin' me!"

"I'll bat your fool head off!" Bronc rapped out. He moved Lucy between his brother and the syndicate manager.

Eleven men who had tensed at the timbre of Plug's voice, relaxed again into slouching watchfulness.

"Why don't you bet your horses? Make it a claiming race. Then I'll race yuh," Sligo suggested curtly. "Winner keeps the horses, and pays the loser fifty bucks claiming fee."

"Ain't got fifty bucks."

"I'll take your saddles or guns for that much."

"Mister," said Bronc, "I'm goin' to race my steel-dust, but I ain't betting her on no account whatsoever, and that's final, savvy? Now, I'll run the mare, and bet the black gelding against a fifty-dollar claimin' fee. If that don't suit yuh, yuh got no sportin' blood."

"Where's yours?" Sligo sneered. "What's so special about that mare?"

"She's mine, an' stays mine. She means a ranch to us boys."

Sligo Maxon shrugged. He ordered curtly:

"Jeff, go get the chestnut stallion. It's the best we can do. I'll race for the black gelding against fifty dollars."

"Listen, boss. If it was me I'd make another play," the foreman objected. "That hombre called yuh a polecat."

"What of it? And who the hell would listen to you, yuh shriveled-up apology?" snarled Plug Bowdeen. "Yeah, I'm talkin' to you!"

The foreman drew into himself as a rattler coils. He started a forward step.

"Jeff!" barked Sligo Maxon. His tone was steel. "I gave yuh your orders: Go get the chestnut!"

In the foreman's thin throat the adam's apple bobbed. The reddish eyes fell. Jeff Barnes turned, walked stiffly toward the stable, built at the end of the bunkhouse, and next to the corral.

THE horses in the corral were all standard-breds, and good ones. But the chestnut that came back with Jeff, prancing and jerking at the halter brought

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a spark to Bronc's eye that was hidden by swiftly lowered lids. The horse was chestnut from nose to tail, not a mark or blemish or hint of another color. Chest, barrel, neck, legs . . . speed, power and stamina.

Bronc Bowdeen swallowed, with difficulty. He cleared his throat.

"He—mister, what you trying to put over? Th-that stallion has a bowed tendon. Run a fast quarter, maybe. But, b-but—he ain't no match for my mare."

Bronc's voice gained strength as he went on with that lie. Sligo, the cowboys, even Barnes and Plug, stared at him as if he had gone mad. Two finer horses never stood side by side.

"Quitting, cowboy?"

"No," said Bronc weakly. "Only I know nothin' of your judges—except that they'll be your hired hands, both at the start and the finish."

"Say, are you hintin' this outfit's crooked?" rasped Jeff Barnes.

"No," Bronc flashed back before Plug could get into action. "How do we start? Lap and tap?"

"That's fairest," Sligo agreed, with a hard look at his foreman. "You with the scar—Plug, ain't it? You judge the start. One of my hands will help you, but you give me the tap. . . . Jeff, get my saddle on the chestnut, and then ride out and judge the finish. Stranger— you're Bronc, ain't yuh?—lead your mare back a ways."

The cowboys came running out of the bunkhouse. Sligo gave no further instructions. Every man seemed to know exactly what to do. Jeff Barnes rode slowly across the open range to the finish. The grass was still too short to hide any scattered wire, or patch of rocky ground, such as would give the local man an advantage in the race. It looked as though Sligo Maxon were really anxious to find out, in a fair test, which was the faster horse.

Sligo was quicker and tougher than Bronc had expected. Otherwise, just the person to burn out two nesters. The man was onery. The only fairness in him seemed to be in testing a new horse. Why the exception? Bronc wondered. Every cowman loves a horse race, but there was an eagerness, and an efficiency about this outfit which wasn't usual at all.

Sligo cantered toward him. The red-brown coat of the chestnut gleamed in the setting sun like oil. Fifty yards away the ranch cook was pouring corn meal out of a bag to make a line on the grass.

Sligo and Bronc would gallop over this at full speed. If the horses were lapped as they crossed the line—that is, if no daylight showed between them—the judges would give them the "tap," and the race was on. Half a length made no difference; the fairness of the lap and tap start was that it insured that both horses were in full stride.

"Let's go-o!" sung Sligo under his breath. He touched the stallion with his spurs. Bronc gave Lucy her head.

The leap she gave made his heart swell. What a mare! The rush of air past his face intoxicated him. The judges seemed to fly at him, the grass to spin under the low thunder of hoofs. What a mare!

But at the start the stallion led by three quarters of a length.

BRONC slapped the steel-dust with his quirt. Lucy settled to earth. The beat of her hoofs was like some great, muffled drum. She had never run better. Nor faster. Inch by inch she drew up.

With a flash of steel Sligo thrust out his spurred boot.The sharp rowels were within inches of Lucy's nose.

"Onery son!" Bronc muttered.

But Lucy never faltered. No check in the straining sway of muscles, no break in the plunging sweep of her stride. Yet, inch by inch that sweating chestnut flank moved past Bronc's startled eyes. It was not the threat of the spur that drove Lucy back. The stallion was faster.

They thundered past Jeff Barnes.

"We win! First nose gits the money," he yelled.

Bronc eased Lucy off to the left. Sligo, grinning like a tomcat, drew the stallion away to the right.

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"So, girl . . . Easy, girl," Bronc muttered to Lucy. But his eyes were for the stallion.

He reined slowly, turned in a wide circle. Plug, on the black, was headed for him at full gallop.

"The dirty son! Tricked yuh," Plug said hoarsely. "Now kin I shoot him? Bronc, we got to shoot it out now! I'm left, and if that posse reads our trail— Bronc! Yuh hold the horses. Make believe you're restin' 'em and gimme just half a minute—"

"That's the fastest stallion in the West!" Bronc whispered reverently.

"Damn yuh! Forget horses a second! Listen!"

Bronc came out of a daze. He grinned.

" 'First nose gits the money'," he quoted. "Anything goes in a quarter race, an' yuh know it. That spur trick was fair. It shows an onery nature and the will to do a horse a meanness, that's all."

"It'll do for an excuse—"

"Plug, yuh single-track old fool," said Bronc affectionately, "can't yuh see I had to lose this race? Otherwise we couldn't be sure of staying here over night?"

"Huh?"

"Yuh grunt like a calf kicked in the belly. Sure. There's times," Bronc admitted, "when I don't believe you'll ever learn anything. Don't worry none about being afoot—now. Wait till morning. Point is, I meant to lose deliberate, but I *really* lost. I reckon I got a right to that stallion."

The Quarter Circle cowhands were riding toward them both. Sligo Maxon was grinning still. Even Jeff Barnes had cracked a smile.

"Usual trick?" Plug whispered swiftly.

"Yep."

"But there ain't no barroom nearer than Harmon. You can't work it—"

Bronc Bowdeen gave a sheepish grin and cantered ahead.

"Gents!" he called loudly. "I'm beat, and you're due to crow. I want you should Old Crow, and crow over me while drinkin' on good whisky. Gents, listen: my brother was just whispering that he'd as soon be broke complete as be a poor loser. He don't want that fifty-dollar claimin' fee in cash. Gents, he and I crave to buy a whole case of whisky. If there be such?" added Bronc hopefully.

"There be!" yelped the cook.

"That's a powerfully lot of whisky to drink in an evening," began Sligo.

"Hell, boss, there's fourteen of us! That ain't a bottle apiece!" howled a cowpuncher.

Bronc caught Plug's eye, and winked. A horse race to celebrate, the grim tension of a killing that morning to forget. The men wanted that whisky; the bosses would have to give in.

"Start no quarrels, Plug," Bronc ordered firmly. "Drink plenty, and leave the rest to me!"

CHAPTER III

JO-DARTER NIGHT

EVEN with a whole case of whisky—even with the private bottle that Sligo Maxon brought from its hiding place and contributed to the festivities—the sad moment of the last drink arrived.

On the once-saturnine face of Jeff Barnes there was a foolish grin. The Bowdeen boys were lighting cigarettes from the same match with every cowboy in the outfit. Sligo set his glass down with a bang, mumbled, "Git the bottles," and rose, weaving and swaying as he led the march toward the back door.

Solemnly the cook set the thirteen dead soldiers in line. The bottles glimmered faintly in the last light of a setting moon.

"Draw!" commanded Sligo. The crash of his gun was echoed by a volley. Every man unloaded his six-gun whooping his loudest. The thirteen dead soldiers exploded in a shower of glass—fitting end for a gala evening.

"Boys, I couldn't had more fun in Cheyenne," Sligo pronounced thickly. "She was a jo-darter. Boys, I sure hope you git jobs, an' work hard. Come again, and have another race an' more Old Crow.

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And now good night to all you hombres."

He turned unsteadily toward the ranchhouse, with Jeff Barnes following. The rest trooped toward the bunkhouse. Though the buildings were connected, they were constructed in the Mexican style, each room with its own outside door, opening into the square of the corral.

The Quarter Circle M hands tumbled into their bunks, but Bronc was grinning as he pulled off his boots. Maybe they expected to sleep. They didn't know Plug Bowdeen.

For Plug was full to the eyes, and whisky had one effect on him which the brothers found useful. Get Plug drunk, and he snored. That is, snoring is the only word for what he did, though an inadequate description.

Someone in that bunkhouse would be unable to sleep. The only question in Bronc's mind was whether he would object himself and go outside with his blankets, or whether both he and Plug would be thrown out. He lay down and waited.

Plug began with a rumble deep in his chest that swelled like the charge of cavalry across a long wooden bridge. Rising octave by octave it began to combine volume with the sounds of imminent strangulation. Plug snorted, he choked, and abruptly ceased. Seemingly, he stopped breathing.

A ranch-hand rolled from his bunk, calling out:

"He's dyin'! He's swallowed his tongue!"

As though in mockery the low rumble began in Plug's chest. Again the thunder, the gagging, the silence—dread suspense longer by two endless seconds than the first paroxysm.

From every bunk a head was lifted.

"Bronc," declared a sleepy voice, "either get your brother out of here, or put him out of his misery. He's sufferin' and I can't bear it."

"I could stand hearin' him die every half minute if he just did it in time," another complained. "What gets me is the way he keeps missin' the beat. 'This time,' I thinks, 'he's gone for sure.' "

"I ain't goin' to sleep myself in no place that won't have my brother," Bronc retorted.

"If you call that dyin' burro 'brother' go sleep in the grass with it," the first puncher answered firmly. "Listen, hombre, we like yuh. But we live here, and we gotta ride tomorrow."

A mutter of assent ran down the bunks. Bronc grinned and shook Plug. Swearing sleepily, Plug let himself be led outside, fifty yards from the bunkhouse and close to the corral gate. Instantly he resumed snoring. Any Quarter Circe M puncher who happened to awake would know that a Bowdeen was sleeping soundly. Such snoring argues innocence. The natural assumption was that Bronc was asleep too.

BRONC'S bedroll looked as though it contained a sleeper. But within a quarter hour Bronc was in the horse corral. He whirled a rope taken from his bedroll. In his pockets were bottles and powders from the same hiding place.

He loved horses. In return, they obeyed. That he would alarm the cavvy by roping out one horse never occurred to him. Other men would, but never Bronc Bowdeen. He never had. His rope settled around the neck of Lucy. Soundlessly he led her out of the corral, and shut the gate.

He had taken his own mare.

He smiled as he went toward the stable. Let Sligo and Barnes figure that one out.

The stallion came out eagerly. Bronc's fingers, clamped on the nose, repressed a low nicker of eagerness. The touch of the satiny muzzle filled him with unbearable temptation. As fine a stallion as the whole West could show. Faster than Lucy . . .

He could wake Plug. Mount, ride south . . .

But that would be horse stealing. Bronc had promises to keep, and a conscience. He sighed, but he led the two horses past the snoring Plug. Beyond the corral was the cavvy of ordinary cow ponies. He roped one, made an Indian bridle with the

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end of his rope, and mounted the cow pony bareback. Lucy he roped and led. The stallion followed without leading, nickering softly.

Bronc headed straight out of the valley toward Jim Holcombe's homestead. Humming happily under his breath to the tune of *Chisholm Trail* he improvised:

Thousand-dollar horse and fifty-dollar saddle
I'm goin' to Texas to raise better'n cattle!

He rode fast. The night was but three quarters gone when he slid to the ground beside Jim Holcombe's corral and tied the cowpony to the gate. The mare Lucy he shut in the corral. The stallion he led to the dugout stable, which had survived the fire. He found a bucket, got water from the spring, and struck a match to look over the collection of bottles and powders he carried. These were unlabeled—Bronc did not believe in satisfying the curiosity of anyone who happened to paw through his bedroll. But every one of them was horse dye.

"Mister Chestnut you're goin' to be a bay. That is, you're going to look as though somebody had started to turn you into a bay," Bronc decided, selecting the proper bottle.

Beginning at the near foreleg he set to work. When he reached the shoulder, he struck a match to inspect.

The result made him swear. The dye wasn't striking in right at all. Instead of a true bay, the foreleg was a muddy color, with rusty looking streaks, like the hair of no horse ever foaled. His dye was good. It had never acted that way before.

Bronc was acutely conscious that time was passing. He must be back in his blankets beside Plug before dawn. Nevertheless he must also leave things here looking as though a horse thief had been interrupted while at work.

Hastily he cleaned his rag, took another bottle from his kit, and then scrubbed over the foreleg in the dark. This solution would clean the dye off.

He struck a match—and sat back on his heels. Where he had cleaned the foreleg, instead of chestnut, it was sorrel.

Bright, unmistakable sorrel.

The man who robbed the bank at Harmon had ridden a sorrel. A fast one.

"WHY, yuh damn bandit! Yuh used cheap horse dye!" Bronc swore indignantly. The match burned his fingers. He stood in the dark. His brows were drawn. He was remembering many things.

The oily sheen of the stallion's coat. Barnes' sudden, vicious malevolence. Sligo's eagerness to race horses, and the fact the manager had offered, as a claiming price for the black, a fair thieves' price. They had all gone at that race as though they raced often. Undoubtedly they had. It was a way of transferring the ownership of horses and of paying off thieves in a way to confuse the law.

The stallion stamped in the darkness.

"Ain't your fault you've been rode by a wild bunch," Bronc muttered softly. "I aimed to borrow yuh, but I'd like to keep you at the two B's, back-to-back. I've stepped into more than I figured. . . . Who rode you, boy? They're all tough hombres. Was it Sligo that robbed that bank? He didn't like any other sorrels close to his ranch. Or Jeff? He's a killin' hombre, that didn't like nesters near his spread. Tell me, boy. It'll make things simpler."

The ranch was owned by an Eastern syndicate, and the cattle business in the last few years had been bad. Sligo Maxon operated the spread on salary and percentage of the profits. That he should use the place as a blind was natural enough.

Suddenly Bronc grinned with reckless glee.

"That Jeff Barnes wanted to shoot us for our horses," he chuckled. "Sligo stopped him. Sligo's the boss, an' the smart one. Steady, boy. You're goin' to Texas yet—if I can manage it."

This discovery made a complete hash of his original scheme. He hated to give it up, for it amused him. He had intended

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to leave the stallion half-dyed, part bay and part chestnut and lead the Quarter Circle M outfit to Holcombe's corral in the morning.

And Sligo would find the horse there in Holcombe's absence.

The inference would have been that Holcombe had stolen the stallion to replace the one Sligo had shot, and taken Lucy along because she was handy. At any rate, Bronc had figured, finding the horses here would send Sligo and his foreman into town after Holcombe. They'd accuse him of a crime for which he could prove an alibi, and they'd be hunting him, angrily. Jim couldn't ask for a better break in a gunplay, and when he shot it would be in self-defense.

No kick-back.

The grim irony of that scheme tickled Bronc. Jim couldn't kill that ornery pair for shooting down his girl's father without risk of being hanged for murder. Yet he could shoot them at sight for calling him a horse thief, and everyone would agree he'd done right. The law sure was blind. But now, if the stallion were revealed as a sorrel, the Quarter Circle M wouldn't go near Harmon at all.

That knocked his plan out, which was a nuisance.

"Damn your cheap, water-color dye!" Bronc muttered. "I sure did want this to look like something had frightened a thief off. Now—well, hell! It wouldn't be unnatural for Jim to use his own corral, at that. Last place anyone would figure he'd use."

Bronc selected still another bottle. When he finished the foreleg, it was again dyed chestnut, though to an expert eye the line where the two dyes met was discernible. Also, stars were lower in the west than Bronc liked. He seized the stallion by the fetlock, led it to the corral, and shut it in with Lucy. Both horses were nickering softly as he swung on the back of the cowpony and headed south to beat dawn to the Quarter Circle M.

Not a bad night's work. Risky, but fun. It pleased Bronc Bowdeen mightily.

CHAPTER IV

FLAMES FOR BREAKFAST

ONCE, most unexpectedly, the cow pony neighed, but if he passed a rider it was too dark to see. Only as Bronc galloped down the slope of the broad, shallow valley there came a thread of gray in the east. The sky was pale when he dismounted, half a mile from the ranch-house, and turned the cow pony loose to join the rest of the cavvy. The rest of the way Bronc must make afoot. He approached the buildings in that half-light which is trickier than darkness.

The irregular rumble and gasp of Plug's snoring heartened him. All must be well. Yet ground-reined at the angle of the corral fence stood a pony—saddled!

Bronc loosened a Colt. A saddled pony, at that hour and place was as extraordinary as a man who approached a ranch on foot. Bronc also was where he had no conceivable business to be.

There also seemed fewer horses in the corral than he remembered. Had there been two saddle ponies, or if Plug had been able to imitate his own snoring, Bronc would have prepared for a fast getaway by the Bowdeens.

Couldn't be that. Bronc dropped belly to earth and squirmed toward the fence. An Apache would have done no better, nor clamped his lips tighter at the sight of a buffalo gun thrust through a crack in the poles of the fence to cover the ranch-house door.

All Bronc could see of the man lying prone in ambush was the soles of his boots, and the patched overalls that covered his rump. The buffalo gun was identification enough. Jim Holcombe was waiting to dry-gulch Sligo or Barnes when they stepped outside the ranch-house.

"Damn your meddlin'! There goes your alibi," Bronc thought—and suddenly reflected that there went his own, too. He rose on elbows and knees, ready for a rush if Holcombe turned his head. He thought swiftly:

"If I warn Jim and let him go, he's liable

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to hang for the horses I took. He's been out of Harmon most of the night. If I jump him, he's liable to hang anyhow. An' I'll have a hell of a lot to explain. How come I was wanderin' around, awake enough to creep up on a dry-gulcher? Unless I'm a horse thief. I sure have the meanest luck—"

Only an instant for reflection. Jim Holcombe sensed danger, and stirred. Bronc jerked out his Colt, made a scrambling rush. The barrel of the six-gun slammed down on Jim's head as he tried to jerk his gun back through the fence. Bronc crouched beside a figure wholly limp.

"Hope your skull's tough!" he thought. "Let's see—let's see."

Plug Bowdeen snored on. A maddening sound. For a moment Bronc fought off sheer panic. The east was yellow. It was too late to run. He stood up, Colt dangling, his left fist gripped around the carved button of his hat string, pulling as though to drag an idea out of his head. He scowled, then ran swiftly around the fence to the hay stack piled near the corner of the bunkhouse.

He tossed an armful of hay against the logs, set fire to it, set fire to the stack, tossed a match into a pile of straw inside the stable. As the flames caught, he came running back to Holcombe. Plug snored on. Bronc pulled the buffalo gun back through the fence, crouched with his left hand on the trigger, his Colt in his right. Now that his play was started he felt better. His eyes danced as they watched the progress of the fire.

The hay was burning hot. The logs were pretty dry, too. They were catching inside as well as out.

From the bunkhouse came a shout.

"Smell it? You're already too late, hombres!" Bronc taunted under his breath.

He pointed the buffalo gun at the sky. The heavy *boom* was followed by the screaming whine of a knife-notched slug. Bronc let go with his six-gun, aiming at the ground beyond Holcombe.

"I got him! I got him!" he yelled. "Plug! Sligo! Come quick!"

THE Quarter Circle punchers dashed from the bunkhouse. One snatched a bucket and headed for the spring. Others beat at the fire with blankets. It was too hot to smother; the spring fifty yards away, too far for a bucket brigade to operate. The buildings were doomed.

Plug turned the corner of the corral fence on the run. He had a gun in each hand.

"Who's that?" he shouted at sight of the limp figure Bronc bestrode.

"Nem' mind. Catch two more ponies! Turn the rest loose!"

Plug vaulted the fence.

"Lucy's gone!" he thundered. "Bronc, they've stole—"

"Any horse will do! Quick!" Bronc whipped back.

Sligo Maxon came out of the ranch-house in a blind, frantic run for the stable. He jerked open the door, and recoiled from a belch of yellow smoke luridly lanced with flame.

"The sidewinder!" Sligo screamed. "My stallion's stole!"

"Your stallion, huh mister?" Bronc whispered fiercely under his breath.

Jeff Barnes leaped into the open. The thin figure stiffened; Barnes's eyes flashed from the blazing stable, flames pouring from the door and climbing the log walls, despite the efforts of half a dozen cowboys to carry water and pull away the hay.

"Let it go!" he snarled. "The stallion's long gone or it would be screamin', Sligo!"

Jeff drew a gun. Plug, who was roping a horse, he ignored. The foreman ran across the corral and scrambled over the fence by Bronc, while Sligo ran back and forth before the blazing stable, frantic.

"Who's that?" Barnes snarled at Bronc.

"Dunno," Bronc snapped back. "Some son I saw settin' fire to the stable. He shot an' missed an' I beat him to his pony an' slugged him—"

"All right, all right," Barnes broke in scornfully. "Put up your six-gun. Step back and I'll finish him."

He peered, and shouted:

"Sligo! It's Jim Holcombe. Come here,

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Sligo! You'll just kill yourself in that stable!"

"Holcombe?" Bronc echoed. "Then damn Holcombe for a thievin' coyote! He—"

"Cripes, shut up!" Barnes snapped. "Git your feet out of the way and put up your gun."

"You ain't goin' to kill him?" Bronc cried out. "He's—why, he's unconscious!"

"Close that corral gate. Quick!" Sligo yelled. "Sam—Jeff!"

"I'm busy, boss!" the foreman shouted back. Sligo started across the corral. He tumbled over the fence, catching his trousers, and fell heavily. Neither Barnes nor Bronc spared him more than a glance. Sligo sprang up, panting. The fall had knocked some of his wits back into him. He said:

"Holcombe? Yeah, kill him, Jeff."

"Murder a prisoner? Yuh can't do that!" Bronc shouted.

"Hell we can't."

Jeff Barnes's gun snapped up—aimed for Bronc, not the man on the ground. Bronc's Colt flamed. The bullet hit the foreman in the arm. Bronc's six-gun dropped into line with Sligo's belt buckle.

"This hombre goes to Harmon," Bronc said.

"The hell he does," Sligo countered. His head turned toward the stable. Suddenly he yelled out:

"Git the Bowdeens, boys! Git 'em."

BRONC promptly slapped the manager over the head with the barrel of the gun. He dropped, close to Barnes, who was slumped against the fence, gripping his arm and swearing in a low, bitter monotone.

Slivers flew from the corral fence. The cowhands by the fire had opened up the instant they saw Sligo fall. Their shots were answered by the boom of a Colt from within the corral. Three riderless horses dashed through the open gate. Then came Plug.

He rode Holcombe's pony. The reins were in his teeth. He led the black gelding and a standard-bred, bareback, but bridled. At every jump he fired over the fence at the cowboys. The round blue eyes were battle-happy. He spat out the reins, stopping the horses, and took more careful aim. A scream of agony echoed that shot.

"Catch!" Bronc rapped out. He lifted Jim Holcombe by the collar and belt, slung him in front of Plug, astride. Plug gripped the limp figure in his left arm, holstered his Colt, and groped for the reins. He glared down at Jeff Barnes.

"Reach for a gun!" he said softly. "Go on, reach!"

"Go—to—hell!" Barnes groaned.

Bronc scooped up the buffalo gun, straddled a horse, caught the reins of the extra. It was done in three seconds. Lead hummed, but they made it. The fence was considerable protection; most of the Quarter Circle was chasing horses. In a hundred yards they were out of pistol range, but that long bare slope was their greatest peril. Plug had an unconscious man to balance. He could not gallop.

Beyond carbine range Bronc halted, dismounted, went through Jim's pockets and got a handful of long, blunt Sharp's cartridges. Every one was notched. From the corral fence a Winchester was cracking away. Bronc sent an answer that knocked a hole two feet above the puffs of rifle smoke.

"Yuh losin' your eyesight as well as your brains?" Plug demanded bitterly.

"Aimed to scare him. What you sore about?"

"You. You wouldn't let me shoot Jeff. And then you went and done it—poorly."

"Fought over keepin' a prisoner alive. Not about who stole the horses. Didn't we?"

"I don't know nor care about that. I wanted that woman-shooter plugged," Plug grumbled. "You're plumb selfish. Now what?"

One Quarter Circle M puncher had caught a horse. He was rapidly collecting mounts. By the fence, in plain sight, Sligo Maxon had staggered to his feet. He was yelling:

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"Cut 'em off!"

Jeff Barnes was walking around the fence toward the blazing buildings.

"Bronc, tote Jim yourself a minute an' lend me that gun," Plug pleaded. "Turnabout is fair."

"I distrust yuh," Bronc told him. "Jim didn't steal Lucy, Plug. He was out for Sligo's scalp, and he gummed everything—like you would. Plug, that chestnut was the bank bandit's sorrel stallion, dyed."

"Well?"

"Ain't I kept Jim alive for Miss Jenny? Ain't I burned out the hombres who raided her?"

Plug's expression softened. "I ain't disputing with yuh, Bronc."

"If I can break up a wild bunch, Jim and Miss Jenny will not only get justice, but they go back on their homesteads, too."

Plug Bowdeen grinned and nodded.

"An' maybe I'll get that stallion to keep," Bronc muttered. "Is Jim comin' to?"

"He's squirmin' some."

"Tell him Lucy and the stallion are corralled at his place. He can get them for me, and see they have water. Have him bring 'em to Harmon."

From the blazing ranch spurred eight men, with Sligo Maxon in the lead. Eight, when they should have numbered eleven, without Barnes, or ten, if the cowhand Plug had hit were badly hurt. Bronc scowled, and set the Sharp's to his shoulder. The range was four hundred yards, yet when he fired Sligo flung himself over the side of his horse, which pitched furiously.

The eight riders scattered, opening out right and left, but making no effort to close in on the three fugitives. That howling slug warned them that closer approach meant empty saddles.

"How come they're short-handed?" Bronc demanded.

"I dunno. I was plumb asleep," Plug apologized.

The older brother nodded curtly. The cavalcade moved toward Harmon. Soon three men rode erect. Around them eight men circled grimly, like wolves, awaiting a favorable opportunity to attack.

"Supposing Sligo says you stole his stallion?" Plug asked worriedly.

"He can't. Nobody saw me," Bronc retorted calmly. "I think them two missing cowhands set out to steal Lucy, an' I beat them to her. They're out on the range, but that smoke ought to bring them back before they find her."

"Can't we head that way?"

"What? Show Jim and us both up for horse thieves? And lead Sligo to his stallion? Nothing doin'," Bronc retorted.

CHAPTER V

NICE, QUIET JAIL

JUST outside Harmon Sligo seized his chance. With the three riders in the front of the ring he vanished among the buildings of the straggling little town. The other four pressed the fugitives. The boom of the Sharp's was answered by the crack of Winchesters. The—chase turned to a charge, and a flight.

"Your lead, Jim," called Bronc. He reined sufficiently to let the nester pass.

"Lead where?"

"Jail, of course."

Jim twisted in the saddle with an ugly look.

"Nix. I'm keepin' out of jail."

A bullet buzzed by Bronc's ear.

"Jim, you're opinionated," he said firmly. "You're goin' to jail, unless Sligo stops you with a .45. You're going straight, and fast, too. Else I'll part your hair again—with a bullet instead of my Colt barrel."

The nester spurred his pony. "Wish yuh'd keep out of my business."

"Yuh ain't got none. I have. You're just a *muy malo hombre* that's deceived a trusting gal into lovin' yuh. You've burned down a ranch that belongs to Easterners that's hollering for dividends—"

"I never! I—"

"Then yuh'd better admit yuh did. They'll never hang yuh for arson," Bronc retorted.

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"One of 'em hiding behind that shed. I see his gun sticking out," Plug cut in.

"So'd I." Bronc nodded. "Usually I get shot at when I leave a town. This is plumb a novelty. . . . Jim, I'm right behind yuh. Make no mistakes."

The nester flattened himself to the pony's back. Plug and Bronc hooked a leg over their mounts, Indian fashion, and prepared to fire under the horses' necks, one right, one left. The one street of Harmon was short. They had at most three hundred yards to go. They came like hell-riders.

From the shed corner a bullet clipped Bronc's hat. His return fire knocked out a window, for the pony shied. Sligo stepped from an alley, two guns blazing. Plug gave a bellow of joy, swung upright for a better shot. In three jumps of a horse both got off six shots, all wild; both cursed like madmen.

From behind the horsetrough a cooler gunman let go with a shotgun. Bronc's pony took most of the buckshot, though hot iron seemed to lance through Bronc's leg. He felt the horse stagger, but, just beyond a saloon Jim Holcombe was leaping to the ground; there was the welcome sight of a barred window. Along the hitch-racks tethered ponies screamed and kicked —among them ponies branded Rafter C.

A tall, red-headed man with buck teeth ran from the saloon as Bronc vaulted from his dying mount. Plug reined in, brandishing empty, smoking Colts.

"It's them—it's the Morgan brothers!" howled the redhead, and clawed for his guns. Bronc sent a bullet that splintered through the frame saloon wall a foot from Connors' ear. The boss of the Rafter C dodged as though hit, and made one jump back through the swinging doors, colliding with one of his posse, who had rushed out at the name "Morgan."

"Com'on, Plug!" Bronc shouted.

"Not t' jail! That's Connors—"

BRONC made the jail house in a jump, and plunged inside. Jim Holcombe was already within. A tall man with grizzled hair was reaching into a gun rack for a sawed-off shotgun. He turned as Bronc threw the buffalo gun aside, stepped beside him. There was a star on his vest. Bronc caught the barrel of the shotgun with his left hand, jammed his Colt against the deputy's chest.

"Bringin' yuh a prisoner," he rapped out. "Lock him up!"

Plug ran in, kicked the door shut and bolted it, and began thumbing cartridges into his revolver.

The deputy's eyes snapped with anger, but he relinquished his grip on the shotgun. He said quietly:

"Put that in the rack, mister. Take your gun out of my face. Where's your warrant?"

"Colt warrant," Bronc snapped. "Plug, get out the back door. Keep goin'."

"Go where?"

"Miss Jenny, of course. Look after her."

"Yeah, but—" Plug scowled.

"Take care of that girl. Use your head, button!" Bronc ordered. "Keep moving!"

"Wish yuh'd tell me plumb out what to do," Plug grunted. He went out the back door, like a soldier, just as someone in the crowd on the front began to pound on the jail door with the butt of a six-shooter.

With a look that was hard enough to hold the deputy motionless, Bronc pushed Jim Holcombe out of the office into the room where the cells were. The jail held no prisoners. Bronc thrust Jim into the nearest cell and stepped in after him, shutting the cell door with a clang and a click of the spring lock.

"Hey, yuh've locked yourself in—"

"Honest?" Bronc grinned. "Set down, Jim. Roll a quirley."

The deputy stepped through the office door into the jail corridor. He carried his sawed-off shotgun aimed from the hip. The hammering on the front door re-ëchoed through the building, yet his voice was calm, with a slurring, unhurried, West Texas drawl.

"I'll take your guns now. What yuh done to be lynched for?"

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"Tangled with Sligo Maxon."

The deputy took the guns as Bronc passed them through the bars—two of his own, one of Jim's.

"I'm Jackson Jones, stranger," he remarked. "Howdy, Jim. Was all that shooting at you?"

"Yes."

Jackson Jones shrugged. "Marshal's job to keep order in town, not mine. Miss Jenny swore out a warrant this mawnin', Jim. Did Jeff Barnes follow yuh in?"

"No."

"Too bad," Jones sighed. " 'Course, Jeff will have witnesses to swear Old Man Gildersleeve drawed on him fust, but I'd like to make an arrest just to pacify Miss Jenny some. Excuse me a minute."

The crowd was kicking as well as pounding on the jail door. Jackson Jones turned unhurriedly. He was even older than his grizzled hair would indicate. He had the look of the men who hunted buffalo. He went into the front office and opened a window. Through the shouting outside, Bronc could barely hear his slurring drawl:

"Are you hombres attackin' this yere jail?" asked Jackson Jones. With a double click he cocked both hammers of his shotgun.

The pounding on the door and the shouting ceased. There was a moment of silence; then a babel of voices—vehement, yet low in pitch.

"That's better," drawled Jackson Jones. "There's still too many of yuh clutterin' the boardwalk. Scatter, hombres. Huh? Oh, a horse thief. Well, Sligo, I'll let you and Connors inside in about a minute."

THE window shut. Jones strolled back to the cell. He had put the revolvers away, but his shotgun nestled handily under his arm as he twisted himself a cigarette.

"Tangling with Sligo isn't necessarily a crime," he drawled. "Is your name Alex Morgan, or Bronc Bowdeen?"

"Bowdeen. But I worked for Connors as Morgan."

A gleam that was cold, but admiring, came into Jones's eye. He said dryly:

"Connors was certain it was you. Sligo's plumb mad and shoot-ugly, but Connors tells a straight story. Claims yuh stole a steel-dust mare named Lucy."

"I ride a steel-dust mare, but she ain't his."

"Miss Jenny done described your horse," remarked Jackson Jones. "Texan, aren't yuh?"

"Yep."

"So'm I. Bronc, when I was appointed I promised the sheriff I'd give this section law. Real law. I aim to."

"That suits me."

"Hope so," drawled Jackson Jones. "You're goin' to get it. Miss Jenny spoke mighty well of you, Bronc. I savvy that Jim here has a temper like a Brahma bull. Anything you want to say private?"

"No," declared Bronc Bowdeen.

The deputy turned away. When he returned he ushered in Sligo, who glared savagely, and Connors, who called out:

"That's him! Damn yuh, Alex, what'd you do with my mare?"

"An' my stallion!" Sligo shouted. "Yuh drank my whisky then stole me blind and burned me out, and plugged my foreman—"

"Sligo, shut up. The innocentest man can only explain one thing at a time," drawled Jackson Jones. He lounged against the corridor wall, a cigarette in his left hand, right thumb hooked in his gunbelt. "I'm aggravated at all you hombres. You've used my jail more public than ary saloon. Don't rile me worse. Now, go ahead, Connors."

"This feller was breaking my broomtails and he skipped out the same night I missed a steel-dust mare with fore white stockings and a white blaze—"

"Hear that?" Bronc broke in. "My mare's plain color. I decided final yuh'd never pay no wages, Connors, so I left. That it was the same night yuh lost your horse proves nothing. I got into a poker game and hit a run of luck that left me owning a fine steel-dust mare, branded a

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Lazy S. She was stole from me last night—"

"It's a fact about the color, Connors," drawled Jackson Jones. "Now let's see your bills of sale."

"Mine's at home!" yelled Connors. "I've chased this hombre plumb across the state—"

"Chasin' ain't proving," said Jones. "Maybe you got your man, mister, but you got to hitch him up with your horse before you can hang him. All right, Sligo, you can talk."

"He raced this steel dust with my Tom and lost," the ranch manager began grimly. "We all went to bed liquored, but within an hour, this hombre was gone. So was his horse, and my Tom—"

"Accordin' to you," Bronc cut in, "you were strollin' around your ranch after you'd gone to bed. What for? Furthermore, I saw you run for the stable when it caught fire. If your horse was stole, what was you after, Sligo? Fact is, I slept out all night until dawn, when a horse stampin' the ground by my ear woke me and I saw Jim here settin' the place afire—"

"Why, Jim?" asked Jackson Jones.

The nester rose and glared through the bars at Sligo.

"I'm goin' to git you, and Jeff Barnes, for killin' my pa-in-law what was to be," he said. "I come for that, and I'm damn sorry I got smacked down before it was done. I'll git you when we meet next, and that's all I got to say."

"You fire the place, Jim?"

"I ain't saying. It was a good idea."

Deputy Jones sighed. "I sure like to enforce some law," he said plaintively. "It sounds like plenty of crime, but all I can do on this evidence is lock these hombres up for disturbing the peace. You better dig up some real facts, Sligo. What you got on this hombre's brother?"

"He was snoring—" Connors and Sligo burst out together. They stopped, stared. Sligo scowled, drew the ranchman aside, and whispered.

"Deputy, I want this fella searched," Connors demanded.

On Sligo's face there was a triumphant grin. Bronc's heart skipped a beat. Through his head buzzed the old proverb, "Takes a thief to catch a—"

Bronc shrugged. He wasn't a thief. From his pocket he took a jacknife, and an assortment of small bottles and powders.

"WHAT'S those?" Jones demanded coldly. On Sligo's face the humorless grin broadened. Connors stared at the stuff, frowning. He had heard of dyeing horses, but on Wyoming ranches it was rarely done. He had probably never seen horse dye in his life.

"That's stuff for dyeing horses," said Bronc indifferently. "But you take any of them, Jones, or mix them any way you like, and if you can get anything that will stain a white blaze steel-dust color, I'll hang myself. The mare that's mine, and that was stolen from me at the Quarter Circle M, couldn't be dyed with those!"

"Huh! You used up that color doctoring her," Sligo sneered.

"Or you threw it away when you were done," Jackson Jones drawled. "These need explaining. Hop to it."

"Why? I'm a professional horse wrangler. I dye horses when I can get the job!" Bronc declared indignantly. "Know the last job I had? On the open range north of here. I dyed a sorrel standard-bred stallion chestnut—an' the funny thing was, it had been dyed before. My dye streaked!"

"What kind of hombre rode it?" Jones lashed out. He snapped away from the wall as though impelled by a steel spring.

"Dunno, he was masked," Bronc drawled. He flashed a look at Sligo.

The grin was gone. The pale eyes were fishy, the face still and cold.

"Would you know that masked hombre again?" Sligo asked.

"I might," said Bronc.

"You'd better," warned Jackson Jones. His tone was clipped. "Gents, I was surprised some to see a man fight to get into jail, but this yere is real startlin'. What's yore ideas?"

Connors cleared his throat. "You told

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me to find that steel-dust. Reckon I will. Sligo, will yuh lend me a few riders that know the range?"

"Sure will," agreed the manager heartily.

"Gents, I'm some interested in those horses, too." Jones demurred. His drawl was like a purr. "I'd admire if you kept your men in town until I can send some of my boys with 'em."

"Suits me," said Sligo instantly. "We'll hang out at the saloon. Come on, Red."

He left with Connors. Jones opened the cell, motioned Jim to come out, and locked him in another cell as far from Bronc as possible. He walked back. His voice, always low, sank to the merest whisper:

"Anything to say now—privater?"

"No," Bronc whispered back.

"That steel-dust can hang you, kid."

"Don't you call me a horse thief," Bronc challenged.

"I'm discussin' your demise, not your way of livin'," the deputy retorted tranquilly. "At yore age, kid, I rode high and looped wide. You're smart. If you hadn't smacked Jim, I'd say that was all you were. Jim, he's stupid. He's got a temper like a Brahma bull. Seems like you were willin' to be useful to Jim."

Jones let the sentence hang. Bronc said nothing.

"Times come when a man has to pick his principles," the deputy went on. "Live by 'em, and die by 'em. I stand for law—real law. Your principles ain't steady. You wobble, kid."

"The hell you say!" Bronc flared. "I'll fight for a good horse sooner'n for a man!"

"That's why you buffaloed pore, thick-skulled Jim?" Jones demanded with quiet derision. "Well, *hasta luego, hombre.*"

The deputy left the cells, and apparently, the jail. At least, the front door was slammed loudly.

CHAPTER VI

TEXAS WAY

BRONC BOWDEEN sat on the bunk and examined his leg. The buckshot had punched through the top of his boot and scraped across the fleshy part of the calf, barely breaking the skin. It hurt, but amounted to nothing.

The door opened, and he heard the swift, light rush of a girl's feet. Jenny ran past his cell and threw herself against the bars separating her from Jim. They kissed.

The sullen rather heavy features of the nester took on a different expression—a look that Bronc had surprised on Plug's face, in moments with Sadie.

"Can the button be right?" Bronc muttered. "That Jones sure put it up to me. Have I just been havin' my own fun, an'—oh hell!"

Jenny turned so swiftly she caught him staring. He felt the blood rise in his face. She ran to him, thrust her hand through the bars before he could rise and grip it.

"You kept my Jim alive," she said. "I can't thank you enough. I—"

"It's nothin'," Bronc stammered. "Did Plug—"

"He found me. He was so worried, and he didn't know what to do, and so he told me everything."

"My God!"

"It's all right! I won't breathe it to a soul. Not even Jim," Jenny whispered indignantly. "Mr. Bronc, can't I do something for you? My Jim would be dead, or a murderer an' an outlaw. I want to pay you back. Can't I say I took those horses? I had a ground-floor room, and I could have slipped out; I just couldn't have stood it if Jim had been taken from me, too."

"Nobody'd believe you stole a horse, ma'am," Bronc said.

She was pretty, and so desperately earnest. The gray eyes were frightened, the lips quivered. She whispered:

"I could ride out now. Turn them loose—"

"No, *ma'am,*" Bronc contradicted emphatically. "Them horses bein' where they are is the only hope we got. Is Jones here?"

"I left him talkin' to your brother."

"Hell! Excusin' me, ma'am," Bronc swore fervently. "That Jones hombre

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thinks fast. I like him fine, but he ain't got but one use for me, and that's"—Bronc summoned a quick grin—"either hangin' or helpin' him hang." He added earnestly:

"Don't be scared, Miss Jenny. You see, it's this way." He raised his voice enough to let Jim hear. "That mare is really mine, by rights. Now, if Sligo's cowpunchers have found those horses, there'll be trouble. But I'm plumb certain Sligo is the bank robber, and that he's mixed up with Jeff Barnes in horse stealin' besides. That whole outfit's crooked, and worried. They want to get rid of that stallion just as quick and sure as they can."

"What did yuh steal the stallion for?" Jim demanded plaintively.

"To get you a fair draw that you spoiled by bein' vengeful," Bronc retorted sharply. "Did yuh notice that Sligo called Connors 'Red'? That was a slip. Those two know each other well. Did yuh notice Connors' face when I said I had a mare branded Lazy S?"

"I noticed. It don't mean nothing."

"Bein' in love dulls a man's wits," Bronc retorted sharply. "I'm sorry again, ma'am, but Jim reminds me of my brother some. I reckon it's wonderful to be in love, but a man does get so satisfied with his girl he can't use his mind on anything else. For instance, Miss Jenny—why were you raided? Why was your pa killed?"

"We don't know."

"But I do. It was mostly because Jim owned a sorrel stallion," Bronc declared. "This mysterious bandit rode a sorrel. What happened after the robbery?"

"Posse come foggin' out after me," Jim grunted.

"Which is too close to the Quarter Circle M," Bronc stated. "Sligo didn't want them messin' around. The second reason you told me yourself: You asked where Plug and I were headed, because nothing is south of you but Sligo's outfit. Can't you see now that there are no landmarks? Other strangers would do the same. You were the same as a spy."

"On what?"

"On a station on the Horse Thief's Trail," said Bronc. "It's my belief that Connors and Barnes deal plenty in stolen horses, and that they work together with Sligo."

"You can't prove it," said Jenny hopelessly.

"Might." Bronc grinned. "I got ways of doing things that surprise people some. I'm telling you this to repeat to Jones, Miss Jenny. Don't you tell him, Jim. I trust your girl's judgment more than yours. Ask Jones: Is it customary to send a foreman to get a horse out of a stable?"

" 'Course it ain't. That's the wrangler's job," Jim protested.

"Shut up," said Bronc. "Ask him: Why does a man run round a burning stable when the horse is already out?"

"Who did that?"

"Sligo, Miss Jenny. A burnin' barn excited him more than a gunfight."

The girl repeated both questions in a low tone, but added, "Can't you tell me flat out what you suspect?"

"No," Bronc answered. "There ain't no humor in Jones. He'd like to convict so many folks he might hang one on a technicality. If I only knew what Barnes was doin'—"

Jenny's gray eyes widened. "But he's in town, with all the rest of the Quarter Circle M outfit," she declared.

Bronc Bowdeen's mouth fell open. "Now why—" he began.

EXCITEDLY he leaped to his feet. "Of course. They'd all have to come in! That cinches it, Miss Jenny! Jeff came—which was takin' a chance—for the same reason Sligo hot-footed it around the stable. Did he bring the mare?"

"No."

"Then he ain't found her! If it were just dark instead of forenoon!"

Jenny stared at the excited, reckless face in wonder.

"What's the difference, with you in jail?"

"Don't worry none about that, ma'am! You just keep my brother from gettin' no-

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tions, please! Hide his guns, if you can get him to give 'em up. Play sick, and make him look after yuh."

"Is that all?" Jenny asked disappointedly. "I'd like to do something more excitin', Mr. Bronc. I'd like to help. Must you do everything alone? Your brother'd die for you. And Jim and I would, too. Wouldn't we, Jim?"

"If you told me to," said the nester. He had received no inkling from Bronc's lead.

Recklessness left Bronc's face. For an instant he looked old. He said:

"Thanks, ma'am. I reckon I must." He tried to grin. "Fellers like me got to work alone, because we think sort of different, ma'am. Don't you fret none."

She reached through the bars and took his hand firmly. She smiled.

"You'll meet a nice girl some day. You'll love her and be mighty happy. Because you don't think about yourself first."

They heard the front door open. Jenny ran swiftly to Jim, kissed him again through the bars, and was waiting at the inner door when Jones pushed it open.

"I'll turn Jim loose when I get my posse formed," the deputy told her. "Nobody'll start until after dinner. . . . That brother of yours is some sleeper, Bronc. He snores and he shoots. Neither's criminal. He's sort of vague about that poker game, though. Just what cards did you hold when you won that mare?"

"Damned if I remember," said Bronc gaily, and waved to Jenny as she left.

"You're a hell of a liar," said Jones, with equal cheerfulness. "Did Jenny help you settle your principles some?"

Bronc gave an involuntary, violent start. Jones smiled.

"Others can be smart," he drawled. "Well, *hasta la vista.*"

He went into the front office. The next hours dragged. At noon, Jones fed his prisoners, lavishly, on ham in thick slabs, four eggs that were fresh, and canned peaches. A shuffling Chinaman bore in the food, and waited, eyes like buttons, jaws moving incessantly on a wad of chewing gum, until he could get the dishes away.

Jones lingered near the cells. As the Chinaman stepped to Bronc's cell with the dishes, two things happened, so swiftly that Jim Holcombe missed them both completely.

THE deputy opened the door with his left hand, his right on his gun. The Chinaman flung a dish cloth over the dirty dishes. Bronc would have sworn that was all he did, yet behind the flutter of the cloth he must have palmed his chewing gum. For as he stepped out, he rammed the gum into the door latch. The movement was hidden from Jones by the tray, and the dangling dish cloth. The Chinese turned, looked at Bronc. The shoe button eyes were expressionless. But now, though the latch might click, the door would not lock tight.

But Jackson Jones did not completely shut the door. He let the bars clang, but it was against the heel of his boot. The lock clicked on air. The door was left a half inch open. The deputy started to walk away.

Bronc stood with clenched fists. His voice was choked with the effort the decision had cost as he called out:

"Jones, yuh left the door open!"

The deputy whirled. His face reddened with embarrassment, but his eyes were level and clear.

"Quickest way to find those horses was to trail yuh to them," he said. "Maybe lettin' you escape ain't legal, but it would have done real law work."

"You hire things done as well as do 'em?" Bronc taunted. He kicked the door open, and pointed to the gum.

Jones's mind worked like lightning. He did not move. The flush left his face, leaving it white, and cold. He said:

"Chin Lee would do anything for a hundred dollars, but I didn't pay him."

"Look, Jones." From the waistband of his trousers Bronc slipped a thin piece of celluloid. "That will open most jail locks. I never planned to be here longer than sundown. But if I should be killed escapin',

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a lot of facts I'm pretty sure of would never get to be court testimony."

"You're right," said Jackson Jones. "Somebody else wants yuh out. Onery sidewinders."

"Onerier than you think. They killed a thoroughbred, and an old man, when neither was plumb needful."

"Yuh've outsmarted them."

"I ain't," Bronc said sharply. "Jones, I ain't letting onery hombres spoil horses, nor—nor nothing. I'm goin' to escape, Jones. Plumb now."

"Yuh'll stop a bullet."

"Might not have my name on it."

Jackson Jones started to twist a cigarette. The paper broke in his fingers. He threw the pieces to the floor, whirled on a high heel, and went to the office. He came back with Jim's buffalo gun, and a Winchester. He unlocked Jim's cell, handed the nester his own weapon.

"A man is headin' out to help us, Jim," he said. "I'll take the front side, and you the back. Cover his start."

He looked at Bronc. His eyes snapped.

"There's a horse I own hitched around the corner," he said. "I aimed to prove you'd stolen it. But I'll never prosecute. Not for that one."

"Then it ain't a steel-dust?" Bronc grinned.

"No, damn yuh," said Jackson Jones. "I'll go as far as I can, but I won't hamstring my principles."

CHAPTER VII

THE BIG GUN IS TRUE

BRONC picked the back door for his "escape." Jones' pony, a roan, was in the alley to the left, about equally distant by either route. In the rear, however, both the hotel and the saloon which adjoined the jail projected beyond it, forming a small court with only five windows in the two buildings to watch, whereas in front the street afforded dozens of lurking places for an ambushed marksman.

Bronc jerked the door open, leaped the steps, and ran. He heard a crash of glass. He was seen. A gun muzzle had knocked out a window. He flung himself sidewise, forward, turning a cartwheel as his hands hit dirt, checking his speed and shifting the target without stopping his flight.

A Winchester barked. He was hit. It felt like a brick smashing into his leg, shock more than pain. He was lying on his side against the hotel wall, looking upward, hardly aware how he had gotten there. The boom of a buffalo gun filled his ears.

Above, the Winchester that was slanted at him through a broken window for its second shot pitched downward. The rifle tumbled end over end into the dust almost by his hand. Through the fragments of glass edging the broken window toppled Jeff Barnes. His body hung limply over the sill, with a spreading bloodstain on the shirt an inch below the collar.

"Got him—I got him!" yelled Jim Holcombe.

The foreman blinked. His mouth opened slowly, and fell slack. Not dead yet. But dying. It all took a second—endless time to Bronc Bowdeen because he could not rise. His leg was numb. Only as it began to hurt, and the shock to pass, could he reach for the carbine, use it as a cane to lift himself, to hobble on.

A window in the hotel was flung up. He remembered Jim's gun was single shot. A man dropped into the alley beside him—Plug. He'd come from the sitting room, where Jenny was. He flung an arm under Bronc's shoulder, whipped out the gun. The blue eyes burned.

"The roan in the alley. Then you go to Jones," Bronc choked.

"That horse will carry double!"

"We're fighting. Not running. Help Jones," Bronc said. He gripped reins and saddle horn. Plug's strength hoisted him into the saddle. He touched with the spurs, aware of the round blue blaze of Plug's eyes, of the bewilderment on the face. But Plug obeyed orders. He stood, guns ready, as the roan rocketed out of the alley, past the piles of tin cans, out onto the plain.

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Men were shouting. Boots pounded the boardwalk, horses squealed at the hitch-racks as men hit the saddle. The two shots, from different guns, and the galloping pony warned Sligo and Connors that the escape had succeeded.

Plug waited, under lip outthrust, for anyone to enter that alley. When his brother was out of rifle shot, riding full gallop, the massive shoulders shrugged. Reluctantly, not understanding save what Jenny had told him, and not savvying that any more than Jim, Plug Bowdeen trudged toward the jail to give Jones what help he could, hoping it would be in gunplay that would blow Sligo's outfit off the street.

Bronc found that the roan was fast. No standard-bred, yet a better than average cow pony. He kept plying whip and spur, and headed straight across the rolling hills toward Holcombe's corral. That, and Harmon, and the Quarter Circle M formed the three corners of a triangle. Bronc needed a long lead.

HE GOT a clear five minutes' start before a straggling line of fifteen horsemen, among whom he could recognize Sligo and Connors, loped from town. As he topped the next hill he looked back for Jones and the town posse. Not in sight. Not organized yet. The chase was half an hour old before he finally saw them—a dark mass of horsemen mustering outside a town that distance made tiny. He estimated there were twenty-five or thirty men in that bunch. Big posse. Bigger than Jones would need, and already so far behind in the race as to be out of it.

Bronc forgot those horsemen, concentrated on the dark line of dots between the faraway posse and himself. He had gained on Sligo and Connors. He was pushing his horse, while they had taken a slower pace which their mounts could hold all day. It was only one o'clock. The plains were bare as an egg. There was no escape, save speed, and such a race is not to the swift.

Smart hombre, Sligo. Bronc chuckled mirthlessly. His boot was full of blood already. He couldn't last out an all-day ride, didn't mean to. Ten miles at top speed was all he asked of this roan pony. He hoped they thought he'd lost his head, and was spurring away in panic-stricken flight.

The roll of the smooth green hills made him alternately rise into sight, and dip out of it. Sligo's and Connors' men were separating into groups of four and five, according to the speed of their horses. Once—far, far back—Bronc even glimpsed the town posse. Or part of it, for there weren't fifteen men in that bunch.

Had half of Jones's boys turned back already? Somehow, that wasn't like the deputy. Good man, Jones. Soft spoken, quick to act—though strangely slow in getting that posse mounted.

Let 'em single-foot along. This chase was a battle of men, and their judgment and valuation of horses. Jones just enforced the law—blind, old fashioned law. Horses were alive. As a man treated horses, life ought to treat him.

"That's my principle, and I stick to it, too, Jones!" Bronc muttered.

He rode the roan hard. It was exhausted when he reached Holcombe's corral, but a man foolish, or frightened, would have killed it. Bronc Bowdeen had stretched a three-minute lead to ten, no more. He dismounted with a grimace of pain, and the help of the corral fence. His leg was stiffer than a board.

The mare, Lucy, and the stallion trotted toward him, nickering softly. He flung a rope about the steel-dust mare's neck The stallion whirled away, snorting.

Bronc shifted the saddle to Lucy, hobbling and hopping on one leg. He slapped the roan's heaving, sweat-streaked flank It rolled in the dust, rose, and started toward Harmon. He shut the corral gate on the stallion.

"Goodbye, sorrel boy," he said.

It wasn't easy to say. His leg throbbed. His head had begun to feel light, and to whirl. Even so, if he rode two horses like these, no posse would catch him. Ride Lucy, lead Tom. Shift from Lucy to Tom. Make a hundred—make a hundred and twenty miles a day, yes, sir, on Lucy and

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Tom. Finest stallion and mare in the West. Take them both. Get away. It would be easy.

"It'd be horse stealing," muttered Bronc Bowdeen. "I ain't a horse thief!"

He found a charred stick in the ruins of the burned homestead. He mounted. On the cross bar of the corral gate he wrote:

Sligo—Hot ashes cool

At a fast lope he headed south across the hills. Rolling and green as a sea, those hills. No cover. A prairie bare as the palm of a hand—and a trap. Left a horse for Sligo and Connors, had he? He'd left them more than that. He'd chosen a horse. They also must choose. Risk their necks on the outcome. Bosses and cowhands alike.

A sorrel stallion, dyed two shades of chestnut, pawing and snorting in the corral. A five-hundred-dollar horse, and a link to a holdup. Who'd own him? Who'd take him?

THE Quarter Circle M and the Rafter Cross outfits streaked over the rim of the ridge where Jim had shot at Bronc. Sitting Lucy, with only his head above the skyline on the opposite edge of the valley, Bronc watched. He was a mile and a half off. Lead enough, with Lucy for his mount, unless someone gave chase on the stallion. All the Quarter Circle M knew it for the faster horse.

Bronc's heart hammered his ribs. They milled around the corral, all that were left of the tough hombres of the Quarter Circle; Connors and his three hands. Sligo stood in his stirrups, rubbed out the message with his neckerchief. He waved his arms, arguing vehemently. They were all arguing.

"Choose your mount," muttered Bronc Bowdeen. He rode to the crest of the ridge, where they could see him, and expressed his opinion with a gesture.

Sligo said something to Connors, short and sharp. The latter nodded and started to open the corral gate. The group of horsemen burst like a bombshell. Sligo Maxon whirled on the pony he rode and headed straight south for Bronc, riding at a steady lope. Sligo's men scattered in ten different directions, but generally westward, away from Harmon.

At the corral a rope flashed and settled around the stallion's neck. Connors and his three cowhands headed northward, leading the stallion.

"Yah! Yuh onery thieves!" grunted Bronc contemptuously. "One horse is as good as another to you, Connors, if it's worth as much. And you, you onery sons—you won't face the law to stick to yore boss when there's nothin' in it for yourselves? Figure you're smart? I call it mangy."

He touched Lucy with his knee. Her flowing stride ate the ground toward the Quarter Circle M. Sligo pounded grimly along behind on his tired mount, not losing distance because Bronc did not wish to gain.

By their lights the tough hombres had chosen well. Connors had come south to recover Lucy, valuable horse, and returned with the stallion, even more valuable. The wild bunch at the Quarter Circle were saving their hides; Sligo was ridding himself of a stallion that would put him in the pen if he were found with it, while Connors, with an alibi for the robberies, could pass the stallion off for his own.

Sligo was onery, but he was tough. Harder, shrewder, than his outfit. Sligo might save something yet. He meant to fight. He did not press the chase too fast. The divided trails would confuse and still further delay Jones's posse, but Sligo was too nearly revealed as a bandit to overtire his pony.

Bronc dismounted at the fence of the Quarter Circle M and tied Lucy to the poles. The fence was about all that was left of the place. Where the buildings had been was expanse of ashes, gray, but still too hot to walk on. Here and there a log still sent up a little plume of smoke.

Painfully, slowly, gripping the fence poles and using the Winchester for a cane.

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Bronc stumbled along to the angle of the fence. Lucy would be out of the path of a stray bullet. He levered the cartridges out of the magazine. The only bullet gone was through his leg.

Well . . . fair exchange. He needed that carbine. Sligo was three hundred yards away, coming at a gallop, gripping the horn and firing under his pony's neck, Indian style. Bronc bellied to earth.

BULLETS slammed into the fence poles around him as the manager galloped by. Bronc could have dropped the horse easily enough, but couldn't see anything of Sligo but his hat and the crouch of his knee over the horn. He fired twice, and only bored thin air.

"To hell!" he shouted furiously, tossed his carbine away, and leaped from the saddle. "Stand up and fight. All or nothin'. Neither of us kin waste time!"

He drew both guns and started walking toward Bronc, leaving his carbine on the ground.

"Walk around the fence. I can't climb it none!" Bronc shouted back. He dropped the Winchester over—not quite out of reach, for he did not trust Sligo wholly. In that, he misjudged the man. Sligo swung wide, to get around the fence, but kept coming forward.

He was more than two hundred yards away. It takes time to walk that far, slowly, so the hand won't shake or the lungs pump too hard when speed and certainty are life and death.

"I can hit him at a hundred," Bronc thought. "Can't be sure of droppin' him, though. I'll wait. My nerve's as good as his."

Sligo came on steadily. Bronc braced his shoulder against the fence to favor his leg. He concentrated on the left pocket of Sligo's shirt. It had a white pearl button. A hundred yards. Seventy-five. Sixty. Sligo whipped up a gun and fired. Bronc squeezed the trigger.

Sligo took one more step and fell, without putting out his hands, like a log. Bronc holstered his gun, and ran a finger, slowly, along a groove in a fence pole that had not been there an instant before. It was at the height of his eye.

The boss of the Quarter Circle M rolled his head, feebly.

"I'm comin', hombre," Bronc called. "I can't sprint none."

He hobbled forward, gripping the vertical poles.

By the stain on Sligo's shirt he saw his own shot had missed the button on the pocket by nearly six inches. But he had held low, and in line, instead of erring to right or left. It was a fatal wound. The manager was sinking fast. He whispered:

"How'd you know the hard money from the bank was in the stable?"

"Yuh told me yourself, three times," Bronc answered gently. "Once when yuh sent the foreman for the stallion. Everybody here must have known the sorrel was dyed chestnut. That showed everyone but you and Barnes had to be kept out of the stable for some other reason. Again, you was more interested in the stable than a gunfight. Jeff wasn't—so I figured it was your gold. And again, Jeff didn't leave any hands at the ranch when he came to town—for fear they'd rake those hot ashes."

"Can't figure why you didn't take both horses and keep goin'," Sligo breathed.

"I ain't a horse thief," Bronc answered. "I—I reckon I'm even less of one than I was willin' to admit."

Sligo Maxon's eyes snapped open. He smiled, with the unembittered vision of the dying.

"No?" he said. "Maybe you weren't a thief. But Jeff and Connors were. This was a station on the Horse Thief Trail—and all yuh've left of it is the spring, good water—for settlers! But, hombre—I owned the better horse."

His voice failed. His eyes stayed open until Bronc closed them, moved away a little, and sat with his back against the fence. Slowly, slowly Bronc put a better bandage on his leg. He was too weak to ride. He would not have fled further if he could. Whoever found him first, here he waited for the payoff.

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CHAPTER VIII

DON'T CALL ME HORSE THIEF

NEVERTHELESS he was amazed when the first riders came into sight from the south. That was two hours later. They must have ridden far, and it was the last direction from which he expected to see anyone. They were townsmen, and all strangers except Jim Holcombe. They stared, silently, at Sligo's body, and at him, as though the two were equally guilty. Only Jim came over.

"Plug met Jones in the jail. Jest about got in ahead of Jenny," Jim said. "She told Jones what you said too. It still didn't make no sense to me, but Jones, he allowed, 'By damn! I can see through a wall if a smart hombre knocks a hole in it.' And then, Jones he was slower'n molasses gettin' that posse goin'. Never saw him act so."

"Where's he?"

"Northward," said Jim, slowly shaking his head. "He divided us into two parties. Told us to comb the range, and stop anybody with a horse that didn't have no rider. Sounded foolish. We rode to hell and gone and saw nothin'. And—say, yonder comes Jones, and he's *got* a riderless horse! Can you make something out of that?"

"If it's a chestnut stallion," said Bronc with a weary smile.

"It is!" Jim cleared his throat. "Reckon me and Jenny can rebuild our homesteads now."

"Reckon so."

Bronc closed his eyes, rested until he heard the jingle of bitt chains, the thump of boots hitting ground, and felt his brother's powerful arms beneath his shoulders.

"Just your leg?" Plug asked.

"That's all, button."

"Shucks, I was worryin'!"

"I am, now, button."

Bronc looked up. Jackson Jones was walking toward him, with a poker face. Behind the deputy marched Connors, sullen and angry.

"Howdy," Jones drawled. "See you got half my posse raking hot ashes for gold. You've saved the county the expense of trying a bank and train robber. Me, I just got two horses. Steel-dust mare and chestnut stallion."

"I keep a-tellin' you Sligo swapped the chestnut with me for the steel-dust," Connors burst out. "You had no right to stop me like you done—"

"Stopped yuh? How?" Bronc cut in.

"Slanted over in front of him with half my posse and waited behind a ridge until he rode down plumb into the midst of us," Jones drawled. "You're smart, kid, but I can add more than two and two myself. When that bullet dropped yuh and you got up and kept goin' I knew I'd never see you again if you were one of the wild bunch. I says to myself, 'Jones, there's a certain kind of hor—of hombre, I mean—that only takes *one* horse. You look for another. One which *won't* have a rider.' And I found one."

"I'd already chased him clear across the state!" snarled Connors.

"You ain't particular what horse you have, so it's good," Jones lashed back. "I telegraphed the Anti-Horse Thief Association in Texas this morning. They wired that a steel-dust mare branded Lazy S was stole, all right—but two years ago last spring! Where were you then, Bronc?"

"He was workin' on the Two B's, back-to-back, with me and Sadie!" declared Plug belligerently.

"I kind of hoped so," Jones drawled. "I wired Texas I'd found him headin' south. Likely returning the mare."

"He always does so," Plug declared.

"This stallion," said Jones to Connors, "is needed for evidence. You swapped under duress. I think you swapped to get legal evidence out of the county. Your claim ain't worth a hoot. I'm going to telegraph north to the sheriff to comb your cavvy down to the last colt, and check on every brand in it. Meantime, you're held as a material witness."

"For what?" Connors demanded sullenly.

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"Horse stealin'," Jones told him. "Yuh see, Jeff talked some. Now, is that steel-dust mare yours?"

"I thought she was, though I was willin' to swap the stallion for her," Connors bluffed. "But my steel-dust was never stolen from Texas, and she had white stockings and a star. I claim this hombre dyed her steel-dust—"

"We'll soon settle if the mare is dyed," said Jones. "We know the stallion is. Jim, get a bucket of water and wash both these horses."

The posse made a circle, with the Bronc at the edge, while it was done. Under the rubbing with a rag, the stallion's chestnut color streaked, ran, and lightened to sorrel. But the steel-dust mare kept her color; Bronc kept a poker face. Jones was grave and expressionless as a headstone. He said:

"Well, Connors, is she dyed? Don't seem so to me."

"Reckon she ain't mine," said Connors sullenly. "I never bought a horse I'd any reason to think was stole. 'Course, I might have had one slipped over on me by a thievin' cowpuncher—"

"Sure," drawled Jones. "There's all kinds of horse thieves." He looked straight at Bronc. "I've got to hold that dyed stallion for evidence, in case the rest of my posse picks up some of the punchers from the Quarter Circle M. You coralled him with the mare. Suppose I do the same?"

"Can't have too many thoroughbreds on the range," said Bronc.

"It's a fact," Jones agreed: "Well, boys, speakin' as deputy, and the law in this section, Bronc Bowdeen here has sure rid us of a tough bunch. It's too bad there ain't a reward on Sligo, for Bronc sure earned it. However, there's one thing I've got to call him—"

"Don't call me ho—" Bronc cut in.

"Kid, never interrupt a Texan," drawled Jackson Jones. "Speakin' as a lawman—a *real* lawman—what I call you is *amigo*, kid!"

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No Patriot There

By RICHARD SALE

Author of "Mosquito", "Benefit Performance", etc.

In blind terror, the boy saw Booth stare him straight in the eyes, raise a carbine to his shoulder . . .

(From an old engraving)

Out of the darkest night of American history comes this story of two boys and a dog whom the Nation will never know—and whom the Nation will never forget

i

DOWN in the hollow where the black earth was damp and succulent, where the slimy water of the swamp to the north penetrated as far as it could physically, and then sent on its spirit in the high putrid stink which was born in the bogs, Stumbledown had treed a possum.

At any rate, it sounded as if he had. The hound's wail of delight came up the slope toward the Port Royal road like the eerie cry of a lonely banshee. The dog had a sad sort of voice. He never yelped when he treed anything: just sat back and howled his heart out mournfully as if he had sat down to mark the place of a lost bone or a found corpse.

There was something essentially Russian about him, although the briefest glance would have shown that no austere wolfhound blood had ever mingled with his pure mongrel strain. Back through his lineage, there was no corruption except that which had gave him life, uncontaminated by superior strains.

On the hill behind the hollow, the two

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boys sat, poking at a small fire which they had built behind the twin oaks just off the highway. Jasper Benson, the older of the two, a gangling sort of boy with big ears and buck teeth, said, more elated than sarcastic, "Lawd in a barr'l, jest lissen to thet tail-wagger go! I do declar', Tassle, thet dawg is th' noisiest tail-waggin' cuss this side o' the Potomac."

Tassle Whitcomb, a year younger, better-looking, and vaguely white beneath his copper coat of freckles, said briefly, "Ain't so." And he poked a sharpened stick into the black hide of a potato which lay in the fire atop the bed of coals.

Jasper Benson grinned. "Ain't so? Shucks, Tassle, yo' got eahs, ain't you? Why, thet ole dawg is bein' heerd from hyar to Fust Manassas."

"Ain't so that he's a tail-wagger," Tassle said tersely, "He's a good dog. Ain't many dogs could scare up a possum that quick. We no more than got the spuds in the fire before he let go."

"Let go? Thet walkin' bandwagon didn't let go. He just went off, lak a firecrack'r."

"Well," Tassle said defensively, "what would you expect? Want him to sing *Dixie* for you? Want him to find a possum and come back and get us and then go back to the possum? He's just telling us that's he's got one treed."

"He's tellin' us all right. God res' ole Jack, he's tellin' us. Fo' all we know, he cud be tellin' us theah's devils and spooks in th' hollow, he cud be tellin' us he was sittin' on a skeleton down chonder theah. Lawd, Tass, you got t'admit no dawg ever made them kind o' sounds fer jest treein' a possum. Thet dawg—well glory—"

Tassle Whitcomb rose slowly to his feet and stared down into the black-dark reaches of the hollow. "Does seem funny. He's making a lot of noise for just one possum." He stooped down and picked up his small rifle and tucked it under his arm. "Let's go see."

"Maybe a b'ar," Jasp said. "Pick yo'self a good tree when we cum down theah. What about th' spuds heah?"

"Ain't half-done yet," Tassle said, pushing back the long blond cowlick which hung over his face to give him a mane. "We'll be back here before they ever burn."

THEY left the fire, banking it with more wood; and they went off into the thick darkness, striding down the mild slope of the hill into the misty hollow where the sound of Stumblebum lurked weirdly. The Virginia earth grew soft beneath their naked toes and presently they were on a level and moving toward the howling dog warily. Jasp Benson stopped, and Tassle, missing the soft sound of Jasp's feet upon the earth, stopped too. "Come on," he said impatiently. "You scared, Jasp?"

"I jest was thinkin'," replied Jasp slowly. "Yo' don't reckon thet crazy dawg o' your'n is treed a Yankee soljer?"

Tassle considered it. It was a thought. "Don't think so. What would Yankees be doing up here in this stretch of the woods? They're all down around Richmond. What difference would it make? The war's over. Lee surrendered more'n a week gone now. Supposing it was a Yank?"

"He cud hart us," said Jasp. "Lawd, he cud shoot'n th' knees off'n us if'n he hadda mind."

"I've got a gun here," said Tassle. "You know I can shoot as good as any Yankee. But that ain't no Yank. That's a possum. The war's over, Jasp, and we might as well get used to it. There ain't no more Confederacy, says my mom, and we got to get used to it. It's just one country now like it was before. My mom says we got to forget all about fighting and hating and get to be friends again."

"Friends with Yanks?" Jasp said darkly. "And them bumpin' down mah pap and unk? Not me."

"Your pap and unk done downed plenty of Yankees before they pushed up daisies," Tassle said quietly. "It was give and take, says my mom, and now it's over. If she says so, it oughta mean something. I'm

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the last man Whitcomb she's got left . . . Light a torch and let's go on. You got a match."

Jasp had brought the makings, and he ignited the faggot, tipped with dry grass and twigs which had been sopped in kerosene, and then held the torch aloft, and they went on. "Lawd," he murmured, "yo' speak th' truth theah. Five men Whitcombs, and yo' th' last one. All th' rest o' them daid. Can't git ust to it, Tassle, jest can't. Twin Oaks ain't ever goin' t'be th' same."

"It ain't that," Tassle said soberly.

"I 'member when I was a kid," Jasp said. "Mah pap, he usta point at yo' pap, and he'd say, 'Jasp,' he'd say, 'theah goes Marse John Whitcomb, 'th' fines' southern gen'leman in Twin Oaks.' Yo' pap was *some* folks, Tassle. Mah pap 'n' me, I guess we jest trash."

Tassel nodded, accepting the fact. "Sure you were. Just trash. You didn't go to school. Why, you even talk like trash, Jasp. I had to go to Liberty School at Port Royal, and I couldn't ever go possum hunting like you did with your father. I used to think that being trash wasn't so bad."

They walked on. Stumbledown had settled himself into a low, ghostly howl now, not exerting himself too much. They were closer. They could hear him distinctly.

"If'n th' war's over and they ain't no mo' Confed'racy," Jasp said suddenly, "I reckon Jeff Davis, he ain't pres'dent no mo'."

"Abe Lincoln is president again," Tassle said. "He's president of the whole dang shooting match now."

"Black Republican!" Jasp growled under his breath. "Black damn radical!"

Tassle stopped walking instantly. "Jasp, you're just plain ignorant. You sure are. You know what my father said when he went to war. He said the only reason he couldn't fight for the North was because he loved Virginia more. Just like General Lee said to the State Assembly. But my father said Abe Lincoln was right just the same, right in keeping a union. Two countries here would both be weak, said my pap, and one country would be able to lick the world if need be."

"Tassle," said Jasp darkly, "yo' go tawkin' like a nigger-lovin' Yankee, yo' do."

"Why, shucks," Tassle replied heatedly, "Abe Lincoln went and freed the slaves in '61, and everybody thought that was something. My own pap had freed his own slaves before the war ever started . . . Jasp, look ahead there!"

THEY peered through the misty gloom, Jasper Benson holding the torch out ahead of him. They saw a yellow figure. "Stumbledown!" Tassle cried, raising his gun for any eventuality. They came in closer.

The lopsided yellow dog, with great sad eyes and ears that hung to his chest, heard them come but did not look at them. He was on his haunches with his muzzle pointed at a bigger bulk beyond him.

"Yah!" Jasp Benson snapped. "Tole yo' it wasn't no possum!"

They hesitated, attempting to make out the bulk, a little afraid to come much closer. It dawned on them, finally, that Stumbledown, who was not exactly fearless and intrepid, was standing by without anything more than the hackles raised down the length of his spine to the tip of his tail. So the two boys trod in closer, pushing the torch out ahead of them and smoking the way.

In the clearing, beyond Stumbledown, there were horses. Two of them. They lay on their sides, a heavy brown horse and a roan. They were both dead. That was why Stumbledown howled his heart out. They had both been shot in the head and there was blood from the wounds which raised the dog's hair on his back. Tassle and Jasp went closer, poking the torch down. The brown horse was blind in one eye.

"Lawd," Jasp whispered. "Glo'y!"

Tassle, overcoming a violent sense of repugnance, reached down and touched a

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haunch. "Golly," he said. *"Warm!"*

"This heah blood," said Jasp hollowly, "it's red, not black. Dawgone, Tass, these heah beasts ain't been daid a coupla hours!"

Tassle pointed at the inscription behind the nub of the saddle. It read, *John Fletcher, Liveryman, Washington, D. C.* "From Washington!" he said. "They came all the way from Washington. Why was they shot?"

"Ain't Army hoses," Jasp said. "Thet's a fack. Musta come by th' Port 'Baccy road an' crost th' P'tomac by th' ferry at Pope's Crick. Looka heah, Tass, looka right heah!"

Tassle joined him. Jasp held the smouldering torch close to the earth. In the soft dirt, they saw a hole. Four feet away, heading southwest, there was another hole. Beyond that, another. They followed these holes for fifty feet, then stopped warily.

"Crutch made those holes," Tassle said.

"Ahuh," said Jasp Benson. "And them holes is headin' down th' road t' Mr. Garrett's farm."

"Want to track 'em down?" Tassle asked, not wanting to himself, but putting Jasp in the position of showing fear first.

"Reckon not," Jasp Benson said. He shivered as Stumbledown howled again. Tassle turned and yelped at the dog who fell to the ground as if stricken, and then remained silent.

"If you ask me," Tassle Whitcomb suddenly said, "I think there's something funny going on, and that it's dangerous, and that you and me had better get out of here as quick as we can and get home and keep our mouths shut about the whole thing."

Jasp nodded, then added, "Yo' don' think we oughta tell no one, Tass? No one a-tall?"

"No. If my ma heard about it and thought something was happening out here in the night, she'd never let me go possum hunting again."

"Ahuh," Jasper Benson nodded. "L-let's —let's—" He jerked his head toward the slope, toward the road, toward Twin Oaks and home, and in moments, the three were scurrying back up that dark hill—the two boys and the ill-proportioned dog—making such haste that they forgot both the fire on the summit, and the spuds on the embers.

The spuds were charred throughout before the unattended fire finally died past midnight.

ii

THE following morning, there was mail. At the Whitcomb home, that is; for Jasper Benson had never had but one letter in his life, and if he had had more he would not have been able to read them. When Jasp received news of his father's death at Lookout Mountain, that one epistle in his experience, Preacher Daniels had to read it to him.

Not so Tassle Whitcomb. He could read pretty well. When he went down to Mr. Robinson's general store which was also the Twin Oaks post office, Mr. Robinson had mail for the house; and besides that, bands of women from the village had gathered in the store and were engaging in horrified conversation. Later Tass was to remember their horror, not their satisfaction.

There was a letter from Mrs. Whitcomb's sister in Atlanta, full of news of privation and General Sherman; and there was a newspaper from Richmond, the *Whig*, dated April 17. It had taken several days to come seventy-two miles north, despite the fact that since Lee's surrender travel between Richmond and Washington was supposedly open, clear, and free of the necessity of passports, at Lincoln's own order.

There was also a copy of the Petersburg *Express* of the same date.

When Mrs. Whitcomb finished the letter from Tassle's aunt in Georgia, she wiped a quiet tear from one eye, brought on by allusions in the missive to her husband, who had died at Sharpsburg; and she opened the Richmond *Whig* to see the war news. They heard so little in Twin

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Oaks that was founded in fact; mostly sharp and scurrilous whisperings and rumors which never proved themselves. In March of that same year, four weeks before the surrender at Appomattox, rumor in Twin Oaks had had it that Grant was suing for peace after his frightful losses in the Wilderness campaign. So you couldn't believe what you heard in Twin Oaks.

Mrs. Whitcomb read through the front page of the paper silently, while Tassle waited to hear the news. He saw his mother's soft face harden with stupefaction and quick repugnance. "No!" she cried softly. "Oh my God, no! Now we are truly finished!"

She slumped back into her chair, letting the paper drop into her lap. Tassle reached out and took it and spread it before his eyes. There it was. Beneath the state seal of Virginia with its motto *Sic Semper Tyrannis,* was the news. A black headline—

ASSASSINATION OF PRESIDENT LINCOLN!

And then the intelligence below,

The heaviest blow which has ever fallen upon the people of the South has descended. Abraham Lincoln, the President of the United States, has been assassinated! The decease of the Chief Magistrate of the nation, at any period, is an event which profoundly affects the public mind, but the time, manner, and circumstances of President Lincoln's death . . .

ATTEMPTED MURDER OF SECRETARY SEWARD AND SONS

Dispatches From Secretary Stanton

Tassle Whitcomb devoured the words—Ford's Theater, Abraham Lincoln, the shot, the madman who sprang to the stage, the cries from the audience, "Booth! Wilkes Booth!", the confusion . . . "Ma!" he cried suddenly, "Ma! What does it mean? Is it true?"

Mrs. Whitcomb dabbed at her eyes and took the newspaper back again. She searched it. She found the words she had seen before, after the surrender of Lee: "The publication of the *Whig* is resumed with the consent of the military authorities. The proprietor has had a conference with the Military Governor, who has assented to the publication of the paper on conditions which will be cheerfully and faithfully complied with . . ." That made it true enough. The *Whig* was under the thumb of the Federal Army.

To make certain, Mrs. Whitcomb opened her other newspaper, the Petersburg *Express*. There too, on the third page, the confirmation. She read,

PAINFUL RUMOR

. . . The assassination . . . is said to have occurred on Friday night last at 40 minutes past 10 o'clock. The version which seemed to gain most credence is, that while the President was retiring from Ford's Theatre, he was fired upon from a crowd . . . At the time of this writing, we have no means of ascertaining the truth . . .

"It's true, John," she told her son. His name was John after his father. "It's the truth. He's dead. Shot down by this Booth . . ." She shivered. "It means the end of us, the end of the South."

Tassle didn't understand. "Why do you say that, mom?"

"Because," she replied, "our mercy has been destroyed. What can we hope for now except the blackest reprisals? Would you expect mercy from that beast Stanton or from those Congressional savages whom Stevens leads? Reprisals, son, terrible reprisals! They'll make a military territory of the South unless Andrew Johnson fights them and he won't dare, he won't dare—"

IT WAS not exactly over Tassle's head, but it was too political to hold his interest. He had often heard his mother speak in the same vein: the mercy of Lincoln who was their rock, despite the mutterings of the hard-bitten oldsters of Twin Oaks about the black Republican.

And oddly, it had tempered him into mild defenses of Lincoln when Jasp Ben-

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son started cussing the president. Jasp, annoyed by one such defense, even accused Tassle of being a Yankee lover.

"Ain't so," Tassle had said. "You wouldn't want any Yank to go shooting Jeff Davis in the back, would you? That ain't proper warfare, nor fair fighting. Well, it works the other way around too."

So Tassle didn't want politics and talk of reprisals and of Union congressmen or Vice-president Johnson whose name he was hearing for the first time. Tassle wanted the sanguinary viewpoint; and presently, down Main Street, he searched out Jasp Benson and got it.

"All ovuh town," Jasp said. "I got the story right. Jed Gantry, he jest cum back from Washin'ton by th' Port Tobacco road, th' back door. He was in Washin'ton when it happ'ned. He tole me everythin'. This man, John Wilkes Booth, he shot Abe Lincoln in th' head and then he leapt on the stage and tripped er somethin' and he shouted somethin' they couldn't make out and then he run fer it. Lincoln, he went daid th' next mornin', and this Booth, he got away clean."

"He got away?" Tassle said. "How in glory could he get away after shooting the President of the United States?"

"Dunno," Jasp said. "But they ain't ketched 'im yet."

"But how could he get away? They musta closed every road from Washington as soon as it happened!"

"Jed Gantry says they was talk thet this Booth, he bust his laig when he fell onter th' stage! A bust laig too, and he got away."

"Golly," Tassle breathed, "how could he get away with all them roads closed?"

"Mebbe," said Jasp, "mebbe they fergot to close th' Port 'Baccy road. Lawd, Tass, yo' know th' goin's ons 'bout thet road. 'Fore the war was ovuh, yo' cudn't tell who yo' was goin' t'meet in th' way o' spies. I heerd Jed Gantry say oncet it was th' back door t' Washin'ton and Richmond. Fed spies and Reb spies usin' it alla time. Mebbe this Booth, he got away clean and cum south—mebbe by Pope's Crick."

"Only one?" Tassle said thoughtfully. "Only this one Booth?"

"Ahuh. He was an acktor," said Jasp.

"An actor!" Tassle grunted derisively. "A crazy actor! A soldier would never have done a thing like that."

"Soljers got honor," Jasp said.

"We got honor too," Tassle said tersely. "My father said a Virginian had more honor than anyone in the world."

Jasp was fired with the thought. "Honor, honor, thet's what we's jest full o', Tass. Know what we oughta do? We oughta ketch thet Booth and fry 'im in a bonfire."

"What would you do if we really caught him?"

"Why," Jasp said, "I'd shoot 'im fulla holes, and hamstring 'im and burn his foot and—" He paused and shivered. "Lawd, Tass, I'd be skeered."

Tassle didn't look scared though. His face was thoughtful. "Those horses, dead. There were two of them. Not one. I was thinking maybe this Booth had shot his horse to hide it in the woods, and then gone on afoot. But two horses—"

"Well, mebbe there was some one with 'im."

"That crutch-mark—"

"Lawd God yea! Th' crutch-mark! And th' man what shot th' black Republican—he bust his laig—"

Tassle and Jasp Benson stared at each other, wide-eyed at their own wealth of evidence, trembling at the possibilities which such facts portended. Both were suddenly apprehensive and afraid. They wanted to go, but it took nerve. They gulped. "I bet," Tassle said, "you're afraid to go follow those crutch marks."

"Who, me?" Jasp said. "Not me."

And so, by jockeying half-hearted taunts at each other, they finally placed themselves in advanced positions from which neither could retreat with dignity, and they were thus compelled to whistle up Stumbledown and make the trek out the highway south toward the slope above Garrett's farm.

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But this, really, was what they had wanted in the first place, having needed some moral force to back up their wary curiosity.

iii

BY DAY, the slope and the low ground in the hollow did not look ghostly at all. The jagged strata of low mist had disappeared in the heat of the morning, and although the sunlight could not penetrate much in the hollow—directly that is—there was plenty of light, and they soon came, in some high trepidation, upon the carcasses of the two dead horses.

Here the boys planned to halt and waste some time getting up more nerve to follow the indentations of the crutch which had passed there; but Stumbledown put his ludicrous tail between his yellow-haired legs and slunk off toward the Garrett land, plainly showing that he would have none of the spot where death had overtaken the mounts.

After that, it was up to Tassle Whitcomb and Jasp Benson to follow the dog. Stumbledown made no pretense of following a spoor. Tass knew that the dog was not much good at scent. Even hunting possum, Stumbledown would usually run across a possum by pure accident and then set up a bellow to warn his master. It was never a case of scenting the beasts.

And the dog now followed the crutch-marks only because they themselves followed the most open route out of the thick woods. It was an animal trail which led south and west toward Mr. Garrett's place, where they could see golden sunlight beyond the fringe of forest. Stumbledown, uneasy in the dankness of the woods, wanted some of that sun.

Behind him, Tassle and Jasp followed the crutch marks. On one soft spot of black earth, they found four footprints.

"Ahuh," Jasp, said. "Ahuh."

"You see?" Tassle said in a low hushed voice. "Two of 'em."

As they reached the edge of the woods, Stumbledown growled ominously and Tassle grabbed the yellow dog by the collar and held him. Stumbledown was no bird dog, but he was pointing none the less, his usually limp tail extended behind him like a ramrod. He was pointing the barn which lay across the freshening meadow. Garrett's barn.

The boys both knew that barn. They had been in it often with young Bob Garrett. It was full of old furniture. It had one entrance, the front door; but it had not been built too accurately, and the walls were full of broad cracks so that you could easily see inside. Still in the woods, Tassle and Jasp crouched and eyed it. Every now and then there was a movement past one of the cracks.

"In theah," Jasp said. "Some one."

"Yes," Tassle nodded. "Over left, one sitting down, the other one keeps pacing."

"Take a close look?" Jasp said.

Tassle shook his head. "Might get caught. We'd better not, Jasp."

Jasp was older and he felt a little more confident. "Reckon I cud angul up to thet theah barn and have me a good see-to," he said slowly. "Angul up like a worm on muh belly. Dare me?"

Tassle thought it was dangerous, but his curiosity got the better of him. "Dare you."

Jasp took a long breath and then began to wriggle through the grass toward the barn, taking advantage of every little niche and hollow in the ground. He did remarkably well, and reached the rear of the barn in something under ten minutes—unsuspected and undetected.

He lay very still for a long time, then took a look, and finally came back. He made the whole trip safely but was panting when he pulled up in the woods, and his face was a little white.

"They're in theah all right," he rasped. "Two o' 'em. This Booth, he's theah, sittin' on a floor. Got a crutch. Left laig all busted, gotta splint on it. Lawd, he's heeled too. Got a dagger, got a pistol, got a carbine and he touchin' all three. Little sorta man with a black *mus*tache. Other man, he got a mustache too, but he's

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skeered. He got a pistol. This Booth, he called t'other man Herold. Dave Herold. Whew!"

"Let's go," Tassle said. "Let's go home quick. This ain't any of our business, Jasp, honest it really ain't."

They suppressed Stumbledown who was fearless enough as regarded the inhabitants of the old barn on Garrett's land, and they retreated through the woods up to the slope, and back to Twin Oaks on the pike.

BY MID-AFTERNOON the news was around that there were Federal soldiers in the vicinity. When Mrs. Whitcomb heard it, she kept Tassle indoors, under threat of violence to his person. "I don't want my son out running around with Union cavalry in the streets. It's a dangerous time to be abroad, John, do you understand me?"

"Jasp—"

"I don't care about Jasp Benson. You're staying in the house. It's a searching party, and they're looking for the man who killed Mr. Lincoln. They're apt to be heated and liable to do something terrible, and you couldn't blame them. They're mad, and the innocent are apt to suffer as much as Mr. J. Wilkes Booth when they catch him. And they'll catch him."

"Yes, Ma," Tassle said. "But if Jasp comes over, can't he come in and play with me?"

"He may do that, if he's clean."

Jasp was not clean when he showed up, but he managed to get in. He had awful important things to tell Tassle, and when the boys had gained their wanted privacy Jasp unburdened himself. "Tass," he whispered, "didja know theah was a *re*ward out'n for this Booth and this Herold?"

"How much?" Tassle said.

"Twenty thousand dollars in hard money. Not Rebel paper. Hard Union money. That's a lot, ain't it?"

"It sounds like an awful lot."

"Lawd, Tass, jest think of it! You 'n' me knowin' wheah them skonks is hidin' and twenty thousand dollars waitin'."

"A dagger, a pistol, and a carbine, you mean," Tassle said sourly. "Best thing we ought to do is tell the soldiers and let them go up and catch those men."

"And then we'd lose all thet theah hard money," Jasp said, horrified. "Golly, Tass, yo' ma is rich, but I never had no decent money. Seems like this is a real chancet fo' some."

"It's a chance to get shot in the head and killed," Tassle said. "Why those men would cut you into little pieces, Jasp, if they knew you was onto them."

"Not if'n I had me a gun."

"You don't have a gun."

"If'n yo' could lend me your'n, I'd walk right inter thet barn and tell 'em to grab air or I'd right pulverize 'em, and I'd walk 'em back inter town a mite richer fo' th' trouble. Come on, Tass, come on. We cud do anythin' with money like thet."

"No, sir," Tassle said. "Not me."

"Ain't skeered, are yo'?"

"My ma," Tassle said firmly, "says that I can't go out of the house on account of the Union soldiers around town. And that's all."

Jasp looked crestfallen. "I'd go muhself if'n yo'd lend me yo' rifle and Stumbledown."

"Take them if you want," Tassle said, "but I think you're silly to try it. You'll get in trouble."

Jasper Benson pondered this, but the gleam of gold decided him. "If'n I wasn't back by sundown with yo' gun," he said slowly, "wouldja raise up'n them theah Yank soljers t'come a'ter me, Tass?"

"All right," said Tassle dubiously. "But I think you sure are crazy to try and do a thing like that."

"Yo' won' tell no one? On yo' word."

"On my word."

"Give me th' gun then."

And the last Tassle Whitcomb saw of him, he was going down Main Street south toward Garrett's farm with the rifle stuck down his trouser leg to hide it, and Stumbledown lurking by his dusty bare heels.

Jasp never came back at sundown.

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iv

AT EIGHT P.M., Tassle Whitcomb was frantic. The street, now dark, showed no sign of his friend, gave out no sound of those bare feet clumping along in the dirt. Stumbledown's bark, full and lazy, was missing. No sign of him either. And sundown was two hours old.

Tassle had pleaded in vain with his mother. He could not, of course, tell her the truth; so he had asked to possum-hunt. Mrs. Whitcomb said, in horror, "Possum-hunt on a night when the hills are filled with vengeful searching soldiers? You might be mistaken for—" She shuddered and cast off the terrible thought. "No, absolutely not. You're to go to bed and not another word, do you hear me, Son?"

"Yes, I hear you," he said, and retired upstairs.

But when, at eight, the night failed to disgorge the bony body of Jasp which it had swallowed alive, Tassle knew that he had to disobey his mother and act as a man should act. He had the consolation of knowing that his father would have agreed with him; women were different.

Into the study of Lieutenant Colonel John Whitcomb, Army of Virginia, deceased, Tassle stole quietly. In the desk there, preserved as his father had left it the day he went to war with the other gallant men who followed Lee, Tassle found the pistol. Loaded, it was a formidable weapon. To Tass, who had never fired such a gun, it looked big, and he wondered vaguely at the power of its recoil.

Also in the desk, he found his father's field glasses, which he strung around his shoulder. The gun he slipped into his blouse. "Effects" they had called these things when they were delivered home to his mother. To this equipment, he added a handful of three-inch lucifers; and then, holding his breath, he opened his window and went down the galvanized iron drain-pipe which descended to the ground from the roof.

. . . Tassle found Stumbledown twenty minutes later. He did not go the long way by the slope and hollow, but he headed directly across the fields from Twin Oaks toward Garrett's farm, thinking there might be Federal cavalry on the road. It was the night of April 26; Abraham Lincoln had been cold for eleven days. It was dark and pleasant.

Tassle reached the open meadow and he could see the tobacco shed across from him, but he was looking at it from a side now, instead of from the rear where he and Jasp had seen it in the afternoon.

Tass shivered. He was afraid and he knew it. But Jasp was in there, Jasp was. He'd been warned, he'd been told, and now he was in trouble. Twenty thousand dollars' worth of trouble. Tassle wondered vaguely if there really was a reward and if it were really that amount. He, too, was wary of Twin Oaks' rumors which seldom smelled the truth. He took a deep breath of night air into himself, and started across the meadow.

Fifty yards from the house, he tripped over Stumbledown.

Stumbledown was dead. Tassle saw that when he struck one of the lucifers he had brought along, shielding its glare from the shed with his coat. There was a bullet-wound across Stumbledown's spine. He had not died at once, for Tassle could see the trail of blood which led away from the shed for a hundred feet before the ball paralyzed the dog and forced him to drop there in his tracks and expire.

Tassle did not feel grief for a moment; he was too stunned. Then when full realization crept through him, when he felt the cold firm rigor of death in the yellow dog's body, tears broke from the dikes of his eyes and he wept quietly and completely, unabashed.

He imagined what had happened: Stumbledown running to the shed, growling and barking, and one of the two men firing a single shot. He harassed his mind with pictures of the pain and torture which the animal had borne—none actually, since the bullet had paralyzed his nerve centers

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—and when his grief had dissipated, intense smouldering anger set in.

He suddenly rose and was off across the meadow boldly and daringly, his father's big pistol swinging recklessly in his right hand. Jasp's in there, he thought; Jasp's in there and by the beard of Lee and the beard of Jackson and the beard of Beauregard, if he's got one, I'm going to get him out!

And if Jasp is dead, they'll die, both of them.

He strode up to the barn, swaggering soundlessly, and at a crack he went on his hands and knees and peered in.

He saw them, the man with the crutch and high forehead, and the other man pacing to and fro with a gun in his hand. There was a kerosene lamp burning. It smelled. There was no sign of Jasper Benson.

Tassle looked beyond the piled furniture into the small loft on one side of the barn. It came to him that Jasp had been murdered and stuck up in the loft by the man who could still walk—Herold, his name would be. The other, Booth, with the dagger in his belt, had a bad leg. His face was white and drawn and he seemed to be in pain.

And staring, Tass knew what his father would have said: "No patriot there, son. He struck no blow for the South. Only one mad act for himself, to please his ego, thinking to become ageless in the pages of history for the killing of a tyrant when he himself was the tyrant . . ."

"Pap," Tassle breathed, as if in pain. "Oh, Pap . . ."

HE DID not raise the pistol. Jasp might be alive. Up in the loft, bound and gagged, but breathing still. Alive. He didn't want to kill anybody. I'm only a boy, he thought, as if his mother might have prompted him: a little boy.

He stole around behind the barn and looked up at the second story where the loft door was. No second story really; but there was an opening up there, even in this small shed. He picked the holes and protruding knots and he climbed until he reached the gap and then he wriggled in.

No sign of Jasp here either, no corpse of Jasp or breathing Jasp. And just below him, the two of them, armed and tense and murderous. Tassle hardly breathed. Get out, *get out,* his mind hammered. He turned to go, and stopped.

It was midnight. Midnight of the 26th of April, 1865. And all around the shed, he saw the shadows creeping, the Union soldiers surrounding the shed. He was trapped with those men. He was trapped with the murderers of Lincoln.

He wanted to scream out; but his throat was dry and tough and he was terrified. He stared down at the two men below him. He could have spit on them. Presently the door shook with hammering and a voice cried out in terrible tones that the place was surrounded. Tassle shuddered.

Then he saw young William Garrett come in. Will Garrett had been in the Confederate cavalry and was now paroled. He heard Garrett attempt to persuade the men to surrender their arms and come out.

He saw Booth rise, the lamplight glistening on his high forehead. "Not I," he said tragically. "I'll stay and shoot it out with them! They won't take me alive!"

But Herold gave in; Herold decided to surrender. Tassle watched, saw Herold go out with Garrett. The front door closed. It was unlocked. And then Tass smelled smoke. He stuck his head out the opening and saw fire. They were firing the shed to force Booth out, and already the dry old wood of the barn, in the rear, caught and began to cough flames toward the roof.

Tassle moved in terror and rattled furniture. Booth heard him. Booth started for the door, limping, a cripple, and he turned his head up to stare at Tassle Whitcomb straight in the eyes. In blind terror, Tassle saw Booth raise a carbine, throwing it to his shoulder.

And then, somehow, the gun of Lieutenant Colonel John Whitcomb exploded; and when the smoke cleared from before his eyes Tassle saw the cripple prostrate

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on the floor. Garrett was kneeling over him, and a man they called Lieutenant Baker was beside him; and soldiers were all swarming in the front door, some calling, "Conger got him!" and others yelling, "It was Boston Corbett, not Conger!"

They carried Booth out. Tassle could see the man was still breathing. In awe at the horror of his own deed he forgot the fire, until presently its very crackling brought him to his senses. The soldiers were going up to the Garrett house, carrying J. Wilkes Booth. The flames were mounting the rear wall.

Tassle jumped out into the good green earth, above the flames. It was a big jump for him; it stung his soles, but did little else. And in a moment he found himself running hard for the hollow and the slope, and the rendezvous of the dead horses. He had hardly entered the woods when he heard his name called, sharply. "Tass! *Tass!*"

It was Jasp Benson, on the ground, still holding the gun.

Tassle wailed, "I thought you were dead—"

"Lawd, Tass, am 'bout daid. Stumbledown, he got shot, and me runnin' like a woodcock, I bust muh ankle. Twist'd it. It's all swoll. Guess it's fulla sprain. I couldn' walk back muhself but if'n yo' help me, I can go."

Tassle gulped. "Jasp—" he said hollowly, "I—killed him! I shot him dead! Oh Lord! With my pap's gun! Here! Oh, Jasp!"

Jasp bit his mouth. "Ain't fo' me to tell on yo'," he said quickly. "You 'n' me, we'll keep it a secrit. Ain't fo' me to say. Yo' cum out to save me, I ain't never gonna say on yo'. Yo' my friend, Tass, yo' are."

"If mom ever knows—"

"Till th' day I die," Jasp said solemnly, "I ain't the one t' say on yo', Tass, so help me, Lawd. They ain't no one 'd ever believe yo' anyhow. They wouldn't believe our sayso in a thousand yeahs!"

They stumbled home in the dark, shivering and petrified; and behind them, they left the strangest question of the times: who killed the man at Garrett's farm?

v

HISTORY credits the killing of Booth to Sergeant Boston Corbett. And then history doubts its own credence by saying that it might have been some one else, or that Booth might have shot himself.

For the thing which history cannot understand is written in these words among its pages: *The bullet that killed the man in the barn entered his neck on the right side and, taking an oblique downward course at an angle of about twenty degrees, penetrated three vertebrae and passed out the left side.* This, from the records of the Smithsonian Institute, in Washington.

Then if the bullet ranged downward at twenty degrees, how else could Booth have been shot except from above? And how then could a soldier on his own level have fired the shot which killed him?

History cannot understand this, and rightly.

The man who could give the answer, unfortunately, died the morning of the 27th on the Garrett porch, as the sun was crossing the footbridge of the East.

Being boys, Tassle and Jasp did not keep to their sacred words not to disclose their secret ever; but Jasp was wise when he said they would not be believed. They weren't, of course. And as he grew older and wiser, Tassle found it prudent to be still, for there were dark and powerful men in that tragic era who did not want the truth of any of that strange affair brought into the light.

So history, blind to a frightened boy, a yellow dog, and the moral fibre which binds a strength of adolescent friendship, will go down through the ages, confused, tripped up in the very facts which give it its name, never quite understanding how very simple explanations can be when evidence is most compound.

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WOMEN of

CLIMBER
SHE MEASURED HER ACHIEVEMENTS IN ALTITUDE AND PHYSICAL ENDURANCE AMID ICE AND SNOW. SHE HAS BEEN FAMOUS FOR 30 YEARS AS THE WOMAN WHO CLIMBED MOUNT HUASCARAL IN PERU — THE HIGHEST POINT EVER REACHED BY ANY PERSON OF EITHER SEX IN THE WESTERN HEMISPHERE! THE GREATEST CLIMBER, MAN OR WOMAN, IN THE AMERICAS!
SHE ALSO CLIMBED THE MATTERHORN OF SWITZERLAND, AND SCALED MT. KODOPUA IN PERU, WHEN SHE WAS 60!
SHE CLIMBED ORIZABA AND POPOCATEPETL, THE MEXICAN VOLCANOS, AND MOUNT SORATA IN BOLIVIA. — AND, BECAUSE OF THE UNRELIABILITY OF THE INDIAN GUIDES, SHE MADE MOST OF HER ASCENTS IN SOUTH AMERICA ALONE!
MISS ANNIE S. PECK
AS SHE LOOKED — HALE AND HEARTY AT 84! (UPPER LEFT FROM A PICTURE OF 30 YEARS AGO.)
(DIED 1935)
WHEN THE NEW YORK SCHOOL TEACHER FIRST STARTED THE SPORT, A MAN TOLD HER, "WHY DON'T YOU GO BACK WHERE YOU BELONG?" LATER HE WROTE A BOOK ABOUT HER.
SHE TOOK UP AVIATION AT 60 AND FLEW OVER MOST OF THE PEAKS SHE HAD CLIMBED! AT 68 SHE FLEW OVER THE ANDES AND TRAVELED 14,000 MILES AROUND SOUTH AMERICA!
HER WORST ACCIDENT HAPPENED IN A NEW YORK STREET CAR. SHE BROKE 3 RIBS! ANNIE PECK RECEIVED THOUSANDS OF AWARDS. THE LIMA GEOGRAPHICAL SOCIETY NAMED ONE OF THE PEAKS OF HUASCARAL, "CUMBRE ANA PECK."

A True Story in Pictures Every Week

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DARING

GUARDIAN ANGEL
HER FAME WAS WORLD WIDE. FOR 45 YEARS SHE WAS KEEPER OF THE LIGHTHOUSE AT NEWPORT HARBOR, R.I., THE ONLY WOMAN KEEPER EVER APPOINTED BY CONGRESS. CALLED "THE GRACE DARLING OF AMERICA," SHE MADE RESCUES THAT WOULD HAVE TRIED THE STOUTEST HEART.
IDA LEWIS
SHE PERSONALLY SAVED 32 LIVES!
FOUR BOYS IN A CAT-BOAT CAPSIZED IN A STORM. SHE FOUGHT HER WAY OVER GIANT COMBERS AND SAVED THEM ALL! IDA MADE HER FIRST RESCUE AT 15. HER FATHER, THE KEEPER AT THAT TIME, WAS AWAY. SHE WAS A GREAT SWIMMER AND COULD HANDLE A BOAT WITH THE BEST MALE EXPERTS.
SHE SAW 5 DRUNKEN SOLDIERS TURN OVER IN A BOAT A MILE FROM SHORE AND SAVED THEM ALL! THE SOLDIERS AT FORT ADAMS GAVE HER A SILVER TEAPOT.
IDA WON EVERY KNOWN LIFE SAVING AWARD. GENERAL GRANT PRESENTED HER WITH A SPECIAL LIFEBOAT— AND WHEN SHE DIED IN 1911 THE GOVERNMENT RENAMED HER POST "THE IDA LEWIS LIGHTHOUSE."

Coming Soon: Captain Patrick Meade—Trouble-hunter

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Lords of Creation

The woman pointed. "Next time, send this man," said she

By EANDO BINDER

Begin now this great fantastic novel of adventure in the world of tomorrow

HOMER ELLORY, a brilliant young Twentieth-Century scientist, was not particularly surprised to wake from his long and dreamless sleep in the year 5000 A.D. The crypt which had sheltered him for three thousand years had been planned for just that eventuality. The whim of an eccentric millionaire, the mausoleum contained specimens of Today's civilization, preserved indestructibly for Tomorrow. And when the scientist in charge had, at the last moment, perfected his method for the electrolectical preservation of life, his young assistant had volunteered for the journey through Time.

Ellory is surprised to discover what Fiftieth-Century civilization is like. He had imagined towering spires, colossal skyscrapers, rocket ships—all the paraphernalia of a super Buck-Rogers existence. But the area to which he is first taken is decidedly rural. At first he believes that the men of the future are tactfully withholding from him the wonders of their age, lest they dazzle him too greatly.

Impatient to see the Ultra-metropolis, Ellory takes lessons in the language from Sharina, daughter of the chief, Jon Darm. The progress of his tuition is jealously watched by Mal Radnor, a young chieftain betrothed to Sharina.

AT LAST, Ellory can speak well enough to interview Jon Darm and Sem Onger, the wizened scholar. But first Sharina takes him on a tour of the community. They visit a factory, and Ellory is amazed to see hundreds of men laboriously fashioning plowshares with tools of flint and bone.

"But they could do that so much more simply with tools of iron," he exclaims.

Sharina cannot at first understand the term, but finally she takes him to a museum-

This story began in last week's Argosy

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like structure. One of the cases there is marked: *Said to be iron—20th Century A.D.—Use unknown.* Ellory is looking at a bayonet. He sees other exhibits: bits of copper wire, a rare assortment of nuts and bolts and machine-parts—all tabbed as antiques.

His mind stirs wildly. And he suddenly realizes that not once since his awakening has he seen anywhere so much as a scrap of any kind of metal. He has come to a Second Stone Age!

EXCITEDLY he tries to explain to Sem Onger and Jon Darm that even if they have forgotten the uses of metal, it can still be produced, from ore.

"Ore," says Sem Onger sagely. "That is the word. *Ore.* I had forgotten. Listen, Humrelly, the earth's metallic ore was exhausted more than a thousand years ago."

For proof he reads from the works of an ancient scientist. The world's ore had, in his day, been on the verge of exhaustion. Countless, unending wars had used it all up. And the substitution processes begun in the Twentieth Century had never been commercially successful. The scientist, in his writing, mentions his secret which he intends to withhold from bloodthirsty mankind.

Sem Onger explains to Ellory that civilization has gone back to an agriculturo-tribal basis. All over the world, man has reverted to the primitive.

Suddenly Ellory is startled. He stares upward, his ears tingling with an unbelievable sound—and he sees, a distant speck in the sky, an aeroplane. . . .

CHAPTER VI

MEN OF ANTARKA

THE craft was strange, like no aeroplane Ellory had ever seen. Two wide, triangular wings supported a torpedo-shaped cabin, all of shiny white metal. There were no engines apparent, or propellor, but little orange spurts of flame came from the back wing-edges. It was unmistakably a rocket-type aircraft, product of advanced science.

Somewhere on Earth lay civilization! Ellory felt like yelling for joy. So it wasn't entirely Second Stone Age after all!

He watched until the craft had vanished in the western sky, its pace steady and swift. Then he whirled on his companions. Their faces were queerly crestfallen, as if they had been reminded of something they disliked.

"What people have such craft, Sem Onger?" demanded Ellory. "Were you trying to hide it from me? You told me all Earth was metalless and machineless!"

"I was about to tell you of them," replied the old man calmly. "Yes, there is a type of your Twentieth Century civilization, in a cold land of snow and ice, surrounded entirely by water. Lords of Antarka, they are named."

"Antarka?" echoed Ellory, struck by a familiar ring to the word. "Is it south from here—far, far south?"

Sem Onger nodded.

"*Antarctica!* Lords of Antarctica!" Ellory grasped the old man's bony shoulder. "Tell me about them!"

Sem Onger shook his head.

"Little is known of them, save that they have the flying machines, and live in that cold land. They are an isolated people, and have little to do with the rest of Earth."

Ellory's awakening into a second Stone Age had struck him queerly enough. But this was still more bizarre. A people, knowing science and metal, hoarding it for themselves and letting the rest of the world go on in stone-age backwardness!

It made Ellory angry. But he knew he must not condemn them this quickly. Antarctica had been known to have coal and metal ores, even in the Twentieth Century. But certainly not enough to supply the rest of the ravaged world.

Ellory resolved to seek out the so-called Lords of Antarka, in the near future. His pulse leaped at the mere thought of once again seeing civilization similar to his own. But in the meantime, he felt a tie with these people who had disinterred him.

Perhaps something might be done for them, within the limits of present-day conditions.

IN THE next month, Ellory spent much of his time with Sem Onger. The old seer was in a frenzy of delight over the

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relics of the crypt. Ellory talked himself hoarse, explaining everything to his insatiable curiosity. Sharina came in often to listen, eyes wide at the wonders of the Twentieth Century.

They seemed most intrigued by the motion pictures. Ellory found himself twisting the heavily-geared crank long hours while they watched.

"Oh, for one little half-horsepower motor!" he often said, smiling helplessly at the impossible wish. Yet down in Antarctica—it was a curious thought—they had machines, metals, civilization. Bleak wilderness in 1940, home of civilization today. And America, Europe, Asia, in the reverse role, in a stone age. Queer trick of fate.

Sharina and Sem Onger sat dumbly through most of the reels, watching trains, autos, aircraft without comment. But when a common two-wheeled bicycle appeared in one scene, they broke out in excited words. It was something they could almost understand. Its motion to them seemed swift and miraculous.

Sharina always stared with pathetic yearning at the women's clothing shown in the pictures. It was a pitiful manifestation of the eternal feminine, and it summed up in itself the aching absence of the things of civilization.

Old Sem Onger kept shaking his head at what he saw, as though denying the evidence of his eyes. He jumped back half frightened as a city scene showed an elevated train rounding a curve.

"It will fall!" he cried.

"Don't worry," admonished Ellory, chuckling. "If it didn't then, it won't now."

He caught his breath. He tried to realize that all this had happened 3000 years ago. That these were nothing but mocking images, ghosts of things that were, caught on a film. That it was all vanished into limbo.

"Ah, there were so many great things in the past!" old Sem Onger sighed. "So many secrets that we can never know, of that time and later. What was the secret, for instance, of that man of 3000 A.D., who wrote at the close of the scientific age?"

Ellory suddenly stopped turning the handle and let the film come to a stop.

"Yes!" he said, realizing that this had been in his subconscious mind all along. What *was* that secret? Sem Onger, where did you find his original writing?"

"In the ruins of ancient Norak. What did you call it—Noo Yoruk? I have often wandered there, trying to imagine what that great city was like before its fall in 3090 A.D., in some terrible war. The papers seemed to be carefully preserved, in an envelope of gold leaf, among the debris of a stone vault."

In Ellory's mind rose a vision of a tiled laboratory. A scientist of the Thirtieth Century had toiled there, had discovered some great thing and then had died with it; but he had left an enigmatic record. It might mean something. It might not.

"Can you find the stone vault again?" Ellory asked.

"Perhaps."

"Then we'll make a trip to Norak," Ellory stated. "I want to see the ruins of New York anyway."

All that month, Ellory had been thinking deeply, adjusting himself to Fiftieth Century life. He had nourished the thought of doing something for the Fiftieth Century, with his Twentieth-Century knowledge. But where to begin? Perhaps he would find a lead among those ruins, symbol of a greater age, even if the strange scientist's secret were not found.

"I'm going with you," Sharina said unexpectedly.

"What?"

Ellory turned a dubious face toward her. "I think you'd better not, angel. Mal Radnor wouldn't like it—"

"I'm going," the girl reiterated. She smiled up at him with all the enigmatic caprice of womankind in any age. "Besides," she added, half in explanation, "It will be dull up here. Mal Radnor leaves, himself, soon, for the border garrisons in

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the south. He is war chieftain. There is a rumor of trouble with the Quoise."

"Wouldn't your father object?"

"He has told me to treat our guest from the past with the utmost of attention!"

"But still—"

Sem Onger broke in, toothless mouth drawn up in a sly grimace.

"You cannot argue with a woman of our day, Humrelly, any more than you could, I warrant, in your time. Besides, she is a good cook and one gets hungry traveling."

The next moment his tone changed. "However, we will not leave till after the visit of the Lords of Antarka. They will come tomorrow."

Ellory stiffened. "Lords of Antarka—visit? What for? I thought they had nothing to do with the rest of the world?"

"Tomorrow—you will see."

Ellory could get no more out of them. It seemed a delicate subject, and courtesy forbade too much prying.

CHAPTER VII

THE SLAVES GO FORTH

ELLORY did see. He noticed in the morning, how strangely the atmosphere had changed. The city's normal activity was suspended. A shroud of silence and gloom lay over the people.

Ellory noticed all this subconsciously. But mainly he thrilled at the thought of seeing these mysterious Lords of an isolated civilization, perhaps talking to them.

Promptly at noon, a great gleaming airship appeared over the city and descended like a mechanical eagle. Banks of underjets drummed out with a steamy hiss, cushioning the fall. Ellory feared a crash, within city limits, but with consummate skill the invisible pilots maneuvered in a glide toward the wide main square before the Royal House.

Rubber-tired wheels touched wooden paving blocks. Forward rockets thundered out and the plane rumbled to a smooth stop within a hundred yards. Its rocket flames died and the ship became quiet.

Ellory stared.

The craft was like a sparkling jewel in the stone-age setting. In contrast to the mechanical perfection of the ship, all the surrounding city faded to a collection of miserable hovels. Ellory tried to be loyal, but he suddenly compared himself to a wanderer among half-savages, about to be rescued and taken back to civilization.

Ellory stepped forward from the Royal House, in company with Sem Onger, following Jon Darm. Back of them came Mal Radnor and Sharina. The city square had been deserted for the landing, but now faces appeared on all sides, from the streets and windows, peering with fascinated eyes at the great plane.

"This is a *machine* such as you knew, Humrelly?" queried Sem Onger.

"A little more advanced than any we had," admitted Ellory. "If this ship flies to Antarctica and back non-stop, it's a marvel to me too. What is its fuel, do you know?"

"Fuel?" echoed the old seer vaguely. "Must a *machine* have fuel—oh, yes, I had forgotten." He shrugged. "It probably uses coal," he hazarded blandly.

Before their party had reached the craft, its occupants stepped out, emerging from a swinging hatch in the enclosed cabin's side, under the shadow of one huge wing. Three men and a woman.

They were all tall and well built, their garb resplendent in contrast to the rough, drab clothing of Jon Darm's people. The men wore silken skin-tight trousers, trim jackets of blue velvet, helmetlike hats and boots of shiny patent leather. The woman's costume differed only in being of more exquisite colors and more flowing lines.

They made a magnificent group, like four regal figures from the pages of an exotic Arabian Nights.

Ellory thrilled. The evidence of the machine was in the weave of the cloth, in the ship, in everything. Civilization! He strode forward eagerly. They bore their title—Lords of Antarka—in manner as well as in dress. Their stares were endowed

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with a distinctly lordly air that Ellory faintly disliked. But just the same he was on fire to meet and speak to them.

Sem Onger's bony hand pulled him back.

"Softly, Humrelly. You must not precede Jon Dorm." He glanced up with a strange grimace. "You will soon enough know what mannered people these are."

Jon Darm stopped ten feet before the visitors, inclining his head in a deferential gesture which the Antarkans returned only as a brief, haughty nod. Ellory began to sense this was all part of some ceremony. Curbing his impatience, he waited for events to unfold.

He looked the visitors over closely.

BLOND they were, whiter of skin than any humans Ellory had ever seen. Lack of sunlight down in Antarctica, he surmised. Slimly built, finely featured, innately immaculate in poise, it was plain that they led a life of ease, perhaps indolence. They had a China-doll elegance. In contrast, the Stone Age people were burly, rough-skinned, hardened by open-air labor.

Ellory's mind weighed these comparisons slowly, without forming a conclusion. Somehow, in the bizarre tableau, he sensed a significant twist in his conception of this queer time, in which the reincarnated Stone Age and post-Twentieth-Century world existed side by side.

Shock froze him suddenly, as he gave his close attention to the woman of the party. The shock of incredible beauty.

Almost albino-blond, she was a dream of exotic loveliness. Artful touches of cosmetics outlined half-moon eyebrows and upturned lashes in black, lips in cherry red, cheeks blush-rose against alabaster-white skin. Platinum curls peeped from beneath her helmet and fell in a silvery tide past shell-like ears to her shoulders. Gold and silver threads woven into her dress enhanced the lissome lines of her figure, glinting with each slight movement. A flashing blue diamond, pendant at her soft white throat by a chain of golden filigree, vied with the sparkling blue of her eyes.

By all standards, past, present and future, she was outrageously beautiful. Sharina paled and coarsened beside her.

Ellory's hand went unconsciously to his bristly chin, which he had never been able to shave cleanly with flint razors. She saw the motion, but her sky-blue, slumbrous eyes flicked past him impersonally. Naturally, in her eyes, he was just another Stone Age primitive. Ellory had to bite his lip to keep from speaking up, to tell them who he was—a man from a civilization comparable to theirs.

Jon Darm spoke, straightening up after his bow. "Welcome, Lords of Antarka!" He turned toward the woman, inclining his head again.

"Lady Ermaine, of Lillamra!"

Ellory's mind, skilled now in perceiving language relics, translated instantly. Lillamra—Little America. Once the holding of the long-gone United States in that polar land.

"You please me, Jon Darm," said the woman, her voice bell-like. Although the language was identical to the one Ellory had learned, she used an unfamiliar accent, patrician in quality. "You have a certain grace," she added, "so lacking in most of these Outland chiefs."

Her voice, patronizing, became impersonal. "You have the picked ones ready? Bring them forward. Let us not delay."

Jon Darm waved an arm.

From one of the streets filed ten young men, through a silent crowd, standing before the Antarkans. In build and appearance, revealed by brief garments, they were obviously "picked ones"—tall, lithe and strong.

Ellory's brows drew together. Something strange and ominous was going on.

The Antarkans looked the ten young stalwarts over, with searching eyes, as they might have looked over a choice breed of cattle. At command, the young men turned around like mannikins on display, expanding their chests and flexing their muscles. Their faces were expressionless,

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as were those of the crowd around. It all had the air of something casual, accepted, done a thousand times before.

Ermaine, Lady of Lillamra, consulted in low tones with the three men of her party, then pointed out two of the youths.

"Substitutions!" she said curtly.

One of them had a small scar on his leg. The other was slightly stooped in posture. They moved away. Jon Darm waved again, and from the same source as before stepped two replacements. Looking these over carefully, the Antarkans nodded.

"They will do, Jon Darm," said the Lady Ermaine.

She signaled and her companions led the ten picked ones to the rear of the ship, into a roomy space.

THUNDERSTRUCK, Ellory broke from a paralyzed trance. He gripped Sem Onger's arm fiercely. "What is the meaning of this?" he demanded in a sharp whisper.

"Every ninth month the Lords of Antarka come to take away ten young, able-bodied men, to serve them. They never return. . . . Also stores of food products. These, however, we ship down to them in our sailing vessels."

Sem Onger said it so expressionlessly that Ellory gasped twice, at that tonelessness as well as the information itself. He looked at the others. Jon Darm stared at the ground, faintly bitter. Mal Radnor's eyes had just a slight dull anger in them. Sharina alone, by the way she bit her lip, showed other than complete resignation.

"It has been so for a thousand years," explained Sem Onger, in a guarded whisper. "The Lords of Antarka are powerful. They have metals, science, weapons."

His voice was still even, unperturbed, as though he spoke of death, or rain, or something equally as unpreventable.

"Outside of that, the Lords of Antarka have nothing to do with us and all the other people of Earth. They do not interfere in our affairs."

Ellory was still aghast. "Don't interfere!"

His voice burned with indignation, and complete bewilderment. Taking tribute in lives and products—and they didn't interfere! How could Jon Darm's people so dispassionately allow this item of black tyranny to go on? A second count against the Antarkans, in Ellory's mind, was letting the world go on in Stone Age backwardness, while they had science.

Ellory's emotions warred. Almost he jumped forward, protesting, but the woman known as Lady Ermaine of Lillamra was speaking again. He paused, waiting to see the whole thing to the end.

"I wish three young girls also this time," she said imperiously.

Jon Darm made the faintest of grimaces of disappointment, then waved again. Obediently, three young women, at the threshold of womanhood, stood as scantily clad as the young men had, before the Antarkans. The Lady of Lillamra stepped aside with a faint smile, to let her three male companions do the choosing. By their bold, frank visual examination, Ellory guessed the implication.

His fists clenched tightly. One of the girls was rejected, and immediately replaced by another who proved satisfactory to their standards, and all three were led to the ship's rear compartment, vanishing within.

Humans on an auction block—slave-trade! Without payment, without protest. Ellory once again gripped himself in steel bands of control, as the Lady Ermaine spoke.

"This selection does not seem as choice as the last levy." She frowned slightly. "See that the next lot is better, Jon Darm." Her eyes had flicked over Ellory's tall young frame.

"There," she pointed. "He is the type we most desire, among the men."

As if at a cue in a play, Ellory stepped forward, setting himself directly in front of the lovely creature who dealt in such unlovely business. He glared straight into those careless, haughty eyes. "Am I?" he

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said ironically. "Suppose I didn't want to go?"

HIS voice cut through the sudden hush air like a thrown knife. He felt Sem Onger's hand on his arm, tugging him away, but he shook the old seer off with such force that he barely kept his balance.

"Suppose, Lady Ermaine," Ellory added grimly, "we didn't want to send *any* young men and girls with you?"

In one stroke, using the word "we," Ellory had placed his loyalty with the Stone Age people. A few minutes before he had hoped to establish relations of one sort or another with the Antarkans. Now that the ugly drama of the slave-taking had unfolded in full detail, he knew he could never ally himself with them.

The Lady of Lillamra was staring at him. Cold, steady eyes looked into his without emotion. The frosty eyes of a superior being who knew her powers and disdained to be angry with those under her.

"Indeed?" The voice was thinly amused. "Those are hazardous words to—"

"I have more to say," Ellory broke in roughly. All his accumulated rage broke like a dam before a flood. "By what right do you people take slaves?" he stormed. "And those girls—" He choked.

"Slaves? That is a harsh word. Servants, rather. They are treated well. The girls come to like it." The Lady of Lillamra used a calm, conversational tone.

"As for rights, that is a queer question. What is the wrong of it? For centuries and centuries we have used a few of your people as helpers in our cities. And you supply us with food. We do not interfere otherwise in your affairs. We do not hinder your border wars, or community life. Why should you wish to change *our* mode of living, as we have ordered it?"

Ellory gasped, at the sheer effrontery of it. He was not deceived. The woman's argument was shallow, unconvincing, designed to soothe a ruffled Stone Age mind, or confuse the issue hopelessly. Behind it, she knew the truth of their position of tyranny. It was apparent in her calculating eyes.

She was watching him closely, waiting for his reaction. Back of her, one of the men slid his hand within his jacket, as though clutching a weapon.

"Steady, Humrelly—danger!" It was Sem Onger's whisper in his ear.

Ellory clamped down on his anger. He sensed the dangerous ground he was treading on. He was dealing with cold intelligence, not Stone Age simplicity. One more outburst and she might change tactics, condemn him as a radical, command his death. Very likely they were just that high-handed in their domination of these helpless people.

The situation could not be solved in a moment, with hot words. It would take careful thought, this manifestation of an institution a thousand years old.

Ellory shuffled back, simulating embarrassment, easing the taut atmosphere. "Forgive me, Lady of Little America," he mumbled, turning.

"Wait!"

She stared at him suspiciously. "What did you call me? Who are you?"

"Little America," he had said, unconsciously using his Twentieth-Century English. Warning lanced into his mind, against revealing his identity.

"Humrelly is my name," he murmured, in their slurred syllables. "Just a herdsman. I have a defect of speech at times."

"For a moment," she said with narrow eyes, "I thought you used an ancient accent, as though—but no!" Her face cleared, and she laughed at her own suggestion. "It was a fantastic idea. See that your thoughts about your lords are less violent hereafter, Humrelly the herdsman. Tend your flocks and think not too much of things beyond your station."

He was dismissed. Inclining his head, he backed away humbly. Within, he burned at her insulting tone.

"The usual supply ship of food products is on its way, Jon Darm? All the inner lands have contributed?"

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A slim white hand raised, patting a dainty yawn. It was routine questioning, many times repeated in the past, with always the same answer, from Jon Darm:

"Yes, Lady Ermaine. The ships will arrive at your port within the month."

"Then we will go."

She gave one more brief, half-curious glance in Ellory's direction, then turned away.

The four of Antarka entered their ship. The square cleared as if by magic. From the archway of the Royal House, Ellory watched the giant craft take off. Rolling forward a hundred yards under the rear rockets, gathering speed swiftly, it raised into the air lightly on its roaring underjets. In moments its thunderous drone faded and it vanished in the southern sky, bearing away the cargo of ten youths and three girls.

Its destination was icy Antarctica, eight thousand miles away.

CHAPTER VIII

MANHATTAN TOMORROW

ELLORY saw the city return to normal, as if nothing untoward had occurred. People went about their daily business. Carts and wagons rattled up the streets. Children played under shady trees, laughing. Women chattered on corners. The Lords of Antarka were forgotten, for another nine months.

"You had best forget, too, Humrelly," admonished old Sem Onger, as their party stood before the Royal House. "I had not known it would have such a strange reaction in you, or I would have warned you in advance. Every ninth month the ships of Antarka fly to every part of the world. Each tribe contributes its share of the picked ones.

"The Antarkans apportion it according to population. The Lady Ermaine of Lillamra, which is a city, who comes to us, also visits the Quoise and several other neighbor states. The many other states, all over the world, are divided among the other nine Antarkan cities."

Ellory could dimly picture, down in Antarctica, a card-file index in which the Antarkans kept count of slave-forays. So many from here, so many from there—like counting sheep, or gold.

"Each of our states," Sem Onger continued, "contributes a certain amount of agricultural products—grains, vegetables, meats, wool, and so on. We of Norak send a full vessel-load down each time, for the larders of Antarka."

"What of the inland states, without a coast or ship?" asked Ellory, thinking of a tribal group in Wyoming or Tennessee.

"They bring their share to a coast, to be shipped. For instance, the Jendra people, west of us, bring it in wagons and we ship it for them, for which they pay us in hides. The Lords of Antarka must be served without fail."

Sem Onger spoke of a law of the universe, judging from his tone.

"If any tribe fails or refuses to give the tribute, their cities are destroyed and the people hunted to the hills. It has happened rarely."

Still that maddening resignation.

Ellory stood, slowly shaking his head. He had crawled out of the crypt less than two months before. For that time, between visits of the Antarkans, he had seen only one phase of the present world.

Now, stunned, he realized the true picture—oligarchy, in its most advanced form. The whole Stone Age world a feudal backyard! The favored few, in Antarctica's ten cities, supported in luxury, idleness perhaps, by the gifts of food and labor from their primitive subjects.

In return—nothing! Not even one iron plowshare. It was the most one-sided social system in the history of mankind.

Ellory's indignation flamed again, directed now at these people for their passive acceptance.

"Do you think it's right?" he snapped.

"It has been so for a thousand years," retorted Sem Onger guardedly.

"They do not interfere otherwise," shrugged Mal Radnor.

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"I am still chief of my land," stated Jon Darm, rather doggedly.

Little platitudes, drilled into them, undoubtedly, by the Lords of Antarka. Propaganda, blind and senseless.

"But it's tyranny. Bald-faced dictatorship!" exploded Ellory. "It's worse, in degree, than the rule of Imperial Rome ever was! Or feudal aristocracy, or the African slave-trade, or the mass-regimentation of my time. It's capitalistic exploitation on an all-profit basis! Don't you see? It's—"

His voice ground to a stop. The future people stood dumbly, without understanding. His Twentieth Century terms went completely over their heads. He might be addressing deaf mutes. He stared from one to another helplessly.

"No, Humrelly, it isn't right!"

It was Sharina's soft voice. She alone had refrained from the reiteration of platitudes. She came forward, touching his arm, her eyes glowing.

"We all know that, within our hearts. You have said it for us. But, Humrelly" —the glow died—"what can be done about it?"

The others looked at him with the same unvoiced resignation. Their eyes repeated—"What can be done about it?"

"Nothing can be done about *that*," Sem Onger said flatly. "But, Humrelly, we will go to the ruins, as we planned. Perhaps we can do other things, down there."

THE following day, a team of plodding oxen drew them south in a creaking wagon. The driver, a borrowed attendant from Jon Darm, followed a dirt road beside what had once been a smooth concrete highway—now a torn, upflung tangle.

Ancient New York lay ahead.

After a restless night, Ellory felt somewhat haggard. The revelation of the day before weighed oppressively. It had been bad enough to find the world in a second Stone Age, but worse to realize the Antarkan overlordship. Yet what *could* be done about it? The Antarkans had metals, science, power.

Ellory looked around.

The countryside was dotted with small crude huts. Figures toiled in the fields. Here and there a shepherd boy lazed before his flock of sheep or cattle.

It was age-old, pastoral, primitive.

It wasn't barbarism, but neither was it civilization, save of an arrested kind. Ellory reflected deeply during the slow journey. There were so many things lacking that could make life more advanced. Man was meant to progress beyond such simple fundamentals. Metals could transform this static, monotonous setting into something much more vigorous. Science could give them radio, engines, books and all the paraphernalia that could make life so much more interesting and varied.

And it would also, quite inevitably, cancel the gross tyranny of Antarka!

Ellory sighed, as he reached this point of thought.

Science and metals. They were inseparable. The whole history of civilization up to his time, and beyond, had been the history of metals. Gold and silver, most easily separated from dross, had played their part, in pre-history, kindling a spark in half-savage minds. Then, somewhere back in 4000 B.C., copper had intrigued the Egyptians as a decorative metal. By 3000 B.C. had come hard bronze, copper plus tin, already tipping the scales of warfare and empire.

But in 1500 B.C. there had reared the colossus of human invention—iron. "Metal of Heaven" it had been called, because first seen in meteorites. Metal of war it quickly became, in the following centuries, and so important that the early smiths, like Vulcan and Tubal-Cain, were immortalized in literature. Metal of science and industry it had eventually become, into and beyond the Twentieth Century.

But now that chapter of history was closed.

Without metals, what could Ellory do? He might devise the first crude forerunners of machines from his own knowledge, but he could not make them of clay. Earth had been gleaned of the all-important metal

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deposits which must be the basis of any mechanical civilization.

Only hoarding Antarka had metals now.

Ellory bitterly denounced his age, and that following, for selfishly robbing posterity and making possible the stage as it was set today. How could they have been so blind, blind? A historian of this day could write against that period—"criminal waste."

But take a remoter viewpoint, he told himself, say of 10,000 A.D. They would write—"Age of Gleaning Earth-Deposits. Inevitable that they would run out, one way or another, slow or fast. Machineless Period followed, through 5000 A.D., except for isolated Antarka. Then a new science achieved metal-and-power by——, in the year——"

Ellory thrilled. Perhaps he could fill in those blanks! Or was it just a dream that he had no reason to entertain for even a moment?

ELLORY'S heart quickened when, in the afternoon, they passed through what he suspected had been the Westchester of his New York. In a later New York it had evidently been part of the main city, by the numerous stone ruins scattered among the trees. Further on, the Bronx ruins were still more heaped. A ferryman took them across the river at this point, on a huge raft.

Manhattan Island had for centuries been a goat-field. The nimble beasts were not bothered by the ruins and found plenty of good grazing.

Ellory felt a sharper stab when he saw, on the Hudson shore, part of the huge stone bulwark that had once upheld one end of the George Washington Bridge. The bridge itself was gone. Further down, another and huger stone pylon gave evidence that here a mightier bridge had existed, built after his time.

It too was gone.

Now the ruins became fantastic heaps of half-buried, weed-grown rock, towering against the skyline. The wagon had to wind among them. At one place Ellory looked down into a pit and saw part of a concrete platform and some rotted ties. And bones.

Mute evidence of a bomb that had blasted into a crowded subway station.

"There is a record," informed Sem Onger, "that at the fall of this city, ten thousand enemy planes attacked periodically for three months, wiping out all but a few thousand lives."

Ellory shuddered. The World War had been but the first of many scientific wars, each succeedingly more terrible. He pulled his thoughts up from somber depths with an effort.

"Where are we heading?" he asked. "On what part of the island will we find that unknown scientist's vault?"

"To the east, away from the river." Sem Onger looked up in the sky. "But I think we will have to wait for tomorrow. The sun is setting and my eyes are not good in twilight."

They stopped at a fairly clear spot and set up the tent, for Sharina. The three men would sleep under the broad wagon. Ellory watched as the attendant, after gathering firewood, struck a flint to it. When the fire had burned down to glowing embers, Sharina thrust meat wrapped in leaves, and potatoes, into the ashes. It was a hearty, savory meal, topped with coffee made in a thick stone pot.

But Ellory found it strange to muse that these back-to-nature operations were occurring in the heart of what had once been a city of machines. A flick of a switch had turned on light, heat, music. Millions of people had lived almost effortlessly where now they must gather wood to start a fire. All man's ingenuity had been taxed to create a mechanical Elysium.

Now it was all gone.

"Gone!"

Ellory murmured the word as he stood there in the still night, unable to find sleep. The stars winked down on the shards of New York. Here and there a skeleton tower still pierced the sky, defying time. They were like eyeless, brooding monsters. A soft breeze sighed through

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their apertures, like the wailing of the countless dead who had inhabited them.

Ellory felt the dull ache of nostalgia, then, thinking of that bustling, vibrant city he had known. With all its faults, his time had been good to live in.

But then, firmly, he shook his mood away.

Every man must have a place in the society in which he lives. He had had a place in the world he had left. He would make one here. Barring undefined Antarka, that had been his problem, ever since he had realized he was a scientist in a new world without science. He would try, somehow, to give them something of his science.

His eyes narrowed speculatively.

Maybe he could melt down those towers with huge charcoal fires and retrieve the metal. There were piles of iron-oxide powder at their bases, which could be reduced. Perhaps organized search among the ruins would uncover other metal supplies. This Second Stone Age needed launching into a Metal Age. If he could achieve that, it would be a step in the right direction.

But how—with available metal so scarce? It seemed an insoluble problem. And piled on that, crushing the Stone Age people still lower, was Antarka.

Ellory felt himself at the bottom of the heap, struggling against impossible odds. It did not help to think of Ermaine, Lady of Lillamra, and how she had humiliated him.

CHAPTER IX

RETURN OF THE METAL

SEM ONGER'S faulty memory, and the general hodge-podge of the ruins made it a search of two days before they found the stone vault he had talked of.

Earth had piled up around it. Part of the roof was caved in. Ellory scrambled down into the dank, musty interior, holding a lighted candle high. Sharina nimbly followed him, laughing at his proffered hand. Sem Onger very nearly pitched head-first, but Ellory's hand steadied him in time.

"This is it," announced the old seer. "In his time most habitations were made gas-tight and bomb-proof, which explains why it has withstood so well."

It had been a laboratory.

Ellory sensed that, though the moldy débris strewn about gave little indication. He began poking around eagerly, upturning encrusted objects from which scurried spiders and other crawling things.

Sharina gasped when he held up a white skull from which two empty eye-sockets glared expressionlessly.

"Our friend died at his work," Ellory murmured. "Wonder what could have been so fascinating to him—hello! What's this?"

He held up a shapeless ball of dull material the size of his fist. He scratched at the moldy surface with his fingernails.

"Foil!" he exclaimed. "Lead foil wrapped around something—"

A few minutes later he had peeled away dozens of sheets of the soft metal. When he removed the last sheet, a dull waxy lump was revealed. But it was dull only an instant.

Then, suddenly, it began to glow in his hand.

Dim warning clicked in Ellory's mind, in the next second, when he saw the damp moisture on the roof turning to steam. With a choked cry he jammed the lead sheet over it and frantically bundled the others around it.

"Just in time!" he muttered.

The temperature in the room had gone up several degrees. They were perspiring.

"What was that?" gasped Sharina.

Sem Onger looked at Ellory. "Was that his—secret?"

Ellory nodded, his eyes still shocked with thoughtful amazement.

"Help me search through this other stuff for some more of his papers," he directed.

But hours later they realized that what records there may have been were destroyed, either by natural forces or by himself. Whatever enigma lay within the

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lead foil seemed destined to remain nameless and unexplained.

Ellory looked over the junk they had uncovered.

But it wasn't exactly junk. The things buried deepest had been preserved most. There were many things—coils, condenser plates, glass prisms and lenses, parts of intricate mechanisms—that could be made useful with a little tinkering. Ellory felt a surge of joy. Without much stretch of imagination, this could become a laboratory.

And if his busy suspicions were anywhere near correct, the lump of strange matter within the lead foil was the starting point for something important.

"Let us go," said Sem Onger impatiently. "Leave the rats to their domain."

"Wait!" Ellory said. "I want to try something. Blow out the candles."

They obeyed wonderingly.

ELLORY took the ball of lead-foil to the darkest corner and carefully unwrapped it again. The dull wax began to glow again but less brightly than before. Ellory scraped the tip of a strip of lead over the lump and rewrapped the rest.

Then he exposed the tiny portion to the strong light coming down from the broken ceiling. The tip of the lead strip glowed like a diamond and seemed to be on fire. All around them the moisture on the walls turned to steam. The lead strip began to get warm in Ellory's fingers.

Face flushed from the heated air, Ellory's eyes gleamed as he saw that the brightness of the glow was proportional to the amount of light touching it. He strode all around the vault, testing this fact. He trembled, all his scientific instincts alert.

Radioactivity!

And stopped or started at will by the application of light and darkness.

When the heat in the chamber had become unbearable, from the released rays, Ellory led the way out. He placed the lead-strip on a stone block outside, watching. In the sunlight, it became incandescently brilliant and the lead became a molten blob.

Ellory pushed his companions back.

This was a degree of radioactivity thousands of times more active than radium. Soon the little pinpoint of ultrafire bored its way down into the stone. A minute later the big boulder cracked apart like an egg. A steamy hiss sounded as the disintegrating speck hit ground. A moment later all was quiet, with the self-exclusion of light on it.

Ellory strode toward their wagon, almost forgetting his companions.

"Is that some science?" queried Sem Onger, as if speaking of something tangible. "What will it do?"

"Plenty, I hope!" Ellory grunted. "I'm going to come back here, old man, and work in this laboratory—solve the secret of that glowing wax."

"I'll work with you," said Sem Onger promptly. "But first we must ask Jon Darm's permission."

Ellory nodded.

"Particularly since I want to rifle the museum of every bit of metal it contains. I will need them."

"How long will you be here?" asked Sharina, with a veiled glance.

"I don't know," Ellory replied slowly. "Perhaps a long time. Will you come and visit me now and then, angel?"

"Yes, Humrelly," she said simply.

WHEN they were halfway back to the city, a cloud of dust came over the horizon back of them. It resolved itself into a group of horsemen, with Mal Radnor in the lead.

The young war chieftain reined up beside the wagon. For a moment he glowered, looking from Ellory to Sharina. Ellory realized he had made a bad situation worse, by having Sharina along at all. He expected a scene.

But then he saw that Mal Radnor's face held a more significant errand.

"War!" He said the word hoarsely.

Sem Onger and Sharina stiffened, but it did not seem a total surprise to them.

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"With the Quoise people?" Sharina asked quickly.

Mal Radnor bobbed his head, grimly. "They attacked our border patrol and drove us to the hills. They are advancing, thousands of them. As they have threatened for a year, they seek to push back our boundaries to the Hussan River. I go now to gather our reserves and lead back an army. Death to the Quoise!"

With this war cry, the party of soldiers sprang away at a gallop. Ellory's wagon followed at its slower pace. Excitement rode with them.

"This is our tenth border war with the Quoise in the past generation," Sem Onger explained to Ellory. "They hold the land to the south and west, to the shores of the ocean. They have always coveted the rich plains bordering the Hussan River."

Northern New Jersey, Ellory surmised, in terms of the states once comprising his vanished nation. Ellory knew vaguely that Jon Darm's people, about a million strong, occupied most of what had been New York state. Their tribal name, the Noraks, was a language relic contraction of New York.

Ellory asked further questions.

Their "war" involved a few square miles of land. It would engage a few thousands of troops and cavalry, mainly in hand-to-hand battle. Their weapons would be bows-and-arrows, wooden spears, and stone-headed clubs.

It would truly be a tableau from the Stone Age, fought in the same way and for the same fundamental—agricultural land. The thought of empire—which had marked the close of the last Stone Age—was not yet born.

Ellory saw the hand of Antarka, or the conspicuous absence of it, in this too. They didn't interfere in the border wars for a very good reason. Their domination of the Stone Age world was made simple among a collection of little tribal states which had no thought of uniting for common defense!

"How long will this war last?" Ellory asked.

"Possibly a year. At least months." Sem Onger sighed. "The blood of youth will enrich the land for whichever side wins. Ah, if we only had a quick means of victory—"

He glanced at Ellory.

"Your science, that glowing wax—can it help us?"

Ellory thrilled, for both of them so obviously looked up to him as one who could work wonders, if he chose. And yet, what could he do?

"No, not that," he said thoughtfully, already shelving the mystery of the glowing-wax as something for future research. His mind labored. What could he do *now*, to help them? Metals—if he only had those.

And then, clearly, it leaped into his mind, like a stroke of lightning.

"I think I *can* help!" he exclaimed.

"You mean you will join our troops, Humrelly?"

Sharina was looking at him in such a way that Ellory wished he could say yes.

"No again, angel. But I'm going to arm those troops with *metal weapons!*"

Metal weapons, iron ones, from the oxide-heaps in the ruins of New York! Ellory's mind hummed. Charcoal to reduce the oxide, clay pan to hold the molten metal, bellows for forced draft—details could be solved as he went along. And then he would have iron!

Even the crudest of iron weapons would give the Noraks the advantage over their enemies in hand-to-hand struggle.

Ellory glowed within himself. He was about to launch himself into a career, in this second Stone Age. A career that had no limiting horizon, save his own ingenuity and courage.

THE excitement of M-day reigned in the Norak city on the Hudson, when they arrived. Men in uniforms of banded leather had gathered in open places, preparing for the march to battle. Wagons rumbled by, loaded with supplies. Fast horsemen sped by, to carry the message and call to arms to outlying sections of

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the little nation. Shouts rose in the air against the hated Quoise.

Though it was a small Stone Age affair, Ellory realized that to these people it was as vital and important as any great war of his time.

Jon Darm, just concluding a war council with his chieftains at the Royal House, permitted Ellory to enter, with Sem Onger and Sharina.

Ellory spoke to the point.

"I'll make metal weapons for you, in the ruins of ancient Norak. I'll get the metal from red dust around the towers. I'll need a dozen men and several wagon loads of charcoal, clay and animal skins."

"You will make metal out of red dust?" said Jon Darm in Stone-Age wonder. He seemed dubious. "How long would it take?"

"No more than a month," Ellory hazarded.

Mal Radnor spoke up suddenly.

"Metal weapons? What good would they be?" His voice became half taunting. "I think your good right arm, Humrelly, would do us more service!"

It was, in a manner of speaking, a challenge to his manhood. Ellory saw that in all their eyes. Flushing, he clenched his fists and half stepped toward the young chieftain.

But then he stopped. By the Stone Age sense of values, he would be less of a man if he pursued his metal-gleaning. But it would do them more good.

Jon Darm himself spoke hastily.

"I do not presume to hold the rod of authority over you, Humrelly, for you are a freeman of the past. However, in this time of war, men and supplies cannot be spared easily. I will give you one wagon-load, and Sem Onger may be your helper."

The chief waved a hand of dismissal and Ellory choked down remonstrance. For the first time, since his resurrection, he had run into Stone Age stupidity. But he excused Jon Darm. It was war. His nation faced crisis. He could not listen to strange new ideas, even from the man of the past whose time had known miracles. He could not be expected to.

Ellory smiled grimly. The man from the past would have to prove the worth of his idea.

THE following day, Ellory and Sem Onger were en route to the ruins of New York again, accompanied by an extra wagon-load of supplies for an extended stay. Parties of mounted soldiers passed them, bound for battle, with the repeated cry of "Death to the Quoise!"

They were armed variously with huge long-bows and feather-tipped arrows, short stout spears of fire-hardened wood, gnarled clubs, and maces with chipped stone heads. So might the Neolithic aborigines have ridden to battle, ten or fifteen thousand years ago.

Ellory mentally armed them with double-edged sabers and iron maces of crushing strength.

But strangely, in his thoughts, the glowing-wax rose to the fore, a symbol of things to come after this petty affair were done with. He had been sidetracked temporarily from following that goal. It represented a form of radioactivity and locked power. What might it not lead to —transmuted metals, electricity, budding science!

As he passed through devastated Westchester, he began rebuilding the city. Steel towers reared, trains rumbled along, aircraft whined overhead. The Stone Age people of the Fiftieth Century moved into a greater civilization than Earth had ever known. Wonderful cities, without slums, hummed busily. The arts flourished all over the world. All peoples were blessed with prosperity, under a beneficent rule, with Antarka relegated to a minor rôle. The glory of achievement for its own sake became a shining crown to humanity's striving. Perhaps there would be interplanetary travel—

"Humrelly, do you dream of the past?"

Ellory started. He had been talking aloud, and Sem Onger's wrinkled old face peered at him quizzically.

"No, old man, I dream of the future,"

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Ellory muttered. "But I think I'm a fool. The best I may do is make a few iron tools before the ruin-supplies give out. I may not solve the secret of the glowing wax, on which my dream was based."

After a day of unpacking and getting settled in a spot near one of the skeleton towers, Ellory began construction of a circular stone kiln, with bricks and clay—staple building materials in this age.

There was a storm that night as Ellory lay down to sleep on his couch of homespun blankets. He listened to the rain beating against the hide tent.

Here he was, in a primitive world, about to lead the way up the first rung of the ladder toward advancement. At least, regardless of results, he would have the anodyne of striving to still his dreamy unrest.

IN THREE days, Ellory had shaped a wide flat clay pan over the brick firepot. It had dried quickly in the hot sun. The two handles of a simple bellows of wooden sides, cowhide pouch, and rawhide thongs, projected from an aperture.

Ellory carried red dust, almost pure iron oxide, from the base of the tower in a stone pot and dumped it into the clay pan. Then he loaded the firepot with charcoal and started a blaze.

Sem Onger had helped with pitiful eagerness. He bristled with innumerable questions, insisting on knowing what each item and step was for. His mind proved to be nimble, for all of his years. He learned faster than Ellory had thought possible.

While the charcoal fire grew and the clay pan began to simmer, Ellory read in the manual he had brought along from the crypt's science books, refreshing his memory on metal smelting.

How different this was from the giant Bessemer smelters and open-hearth pits of his time! Could he hope to produce molten iron, when his total experience in that industry had been a tour through a steel plant?

Ellory applied himself to the bellows, for long tense hours. At his command, Sem Onger periodically fed charcoal blocks to the hissing fire. Heat began to radiate in withering blasts. Grimed, panting, muscles aching, Ellory kept pumping doggedly, watching red oxide cooking over the red-hot bottom of the clay pan.

Would the oxide never melt?

It did, finally. Ellory's fagging spirit rose and he pumped with renewed vigor. He would succeed!

"1541 degrees Centigrade, Sem Onger!" he yelled above the roar of the fire. "Hotter than anything you've ever known, old man! Now throw charcoal and green wood, half of each, into the molten mixture."

Sem Onger obeyed.

The charcoal burst into flame, performing its duty of reducing the oxide, extracting oxygen. The green wood spluttered, violently, throwing up a huge cloud of dense black smoke and steam, blanketing the open process so that oxygen in the air would not reverse the hard-won reduction. It was a crude method, but the only one possible.

Choking wretchedly from the smoke, Ellory continued pumping in a frenzy. Sem Onger reeled away, mumbling and gasping, but at Ellory's hoarse shout he bravely plunged back, throwing more charcoal fuel into the raging firepot.

How would he judge when the reduction was complete?

Ellory didn't know, but when he saw a watery white-hot liquid bubbling at the edges of the pan, he took that as a sign. He had been pumping, choking, burning alive for ages, it seemed.

He staggered from the bellows and knocked the clay plug away from the melting pan with a long stick.

A tiny trickle of molten metal dripped down to a trough of wet sand, prepared beforehand. The trickle stopped and when, a while later, the wind had driven away the fumes and smoke from the dying fire, Ellory found a shapeless pig of iron lying in the sand mold.

It was about the size of his fist.

No more than a penny's worth, in the

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Twentieth Century market, produced by the consumption of half a wagon load of charcoal and ore, and a full day of back-breaking labor!

But Ellory felt disappointment only for a moment.

"After all," he told himself aloud, "this was the first try. And it's the first bit of iron produced on Earth—outside of Antarka—in perhaps a thousand years!"

An age reborn!

A sense of what he had accomplished suddenly overwhelmed him. So some unknown genius must have felt, an age ago, when he stared at the lump of cooling iron in the world's first crude smelting pot!

Yet this was different; his sense of triumph was immeasurably greater. For what could that unknown genius have guessed of the things Homer Ellory knew —the vast potentialities which lay in that shapeless little pig of metal?

Forgotten civilizations had been built of the stuff; could be rebuilt from the patterns that existed in one man's mind. *Homer Ellory,* he thought; *planner and creator, builder of a new world.*

Sem Onger was eyeing the cooling iron lump, wonderingly. Ellory had to pull him back before he reached to touch it.

"Truly, it is a miracle!" cackled the old seer.

He looked up at Ellory as if at a superbeing. And in that, too, Ellory had his reward. Soon, thousands and thousands of others would look at him that way—

He broke off such ruminations of personal conceit. He looked Sem Onger up and down, laughing. The old man was black from head to toe, his silvery hair sooted, his skin lobster red as though he had been parboiled.

"If you could see *your*self!" The old scholar grinned back.

Ellory laughed weakly; then his knees buckled and he slumped to the grass beyond the firepot. He was fast asleep in seconds. Old Sem Onger sat down to hug his bony knees and rock back and forth, muttering aloud.

"When I was young, I tried it—and failed!" he confessed to himself. "But then, there was no one to tell me to use green wood."

CHAPTER X

VULCAN

A WEEK later, the ring of steel on steel pealed out over the sylvan quiet of dead New York. The sound seemed to hasten out over the world, proclaiming to a metalless civilization that Vulcan was reborn. Like Vulcan, Ellory was pounding joyfully with a metal hammer-head attached to a thick wooden handle. Under the blows, a long flat blade of iron took symmetrical shape. It rested on a block of iron serving as an anvil.

In that blade was destiny.

Ellory had fired the melting pot three more times, gaining experience, and producing more steel-like metal each time. Sand-molds had alternately formed the hammer-head, anvil block and blade.

The blade became a sword, after several hours of grinding with flint-hard stones.

Ellory leaped erect, whirling the heavy saber around his head. Reflected beams of sunlight stabbed in all directions, over scenes alien to the flash of new metal in the sun for centuries.

New, and crude—and beautiful!

"It will make a formidable weapon!" said Sem Onger in awed tones. "You have advanced warfare, Humrelly!"

Ellory stopped whirling the blade suddenly.

Advanced warfare . . .

Ironically, that was to be his first mark in this Stone Age era. Arming one tribe of warring people with a new and murderous weapon, to spill more blood among their enemies! Depressed at the thought, Ellory lowered the blade.

Would it be a wiser course, perhaps, to bury it, and all it represented?

"I know what you are thinking, Humrelly," said Sem Onger sagely. "But you will make victory quicker to us. And thereby, more merciful. And the metal will serve peaceful arts of more consequence."

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Ellory grasped the old man's shoulder, nodding. That was the way to look at it.

"Come on. Let's show this to Jon Darm."

He strode to their wagon. Within himself, he prayed that he had made the right decision. Or was he now, in one moment, twisting the fate of Fiftieth Century Earth into bloodier channels?

A CLATTER of hooves sounded before they had hitched their team. Sharina rode up on a white charger, her golden tresses blowing in the breeze. She dismounted gracefully.

Ellory realized he had missed her. Her simple beauty, lacking any true Stone Age crudeness, was more entrancing than the mental image of her he carried with him.

She smiled at him.

"I came down to see how you were, Humrelly—at my father's request," she said. "He wishes to know if all goes well."

Ellory nodded and smiled. It was likely that Jon Darm, without Mal Radnor to influence him, had thought more highly of Ellory's mysterious mission.

"What news of the war?" he asked in turn.

"Our forces have been driven back," admitted the girl, frowning. "The enemy is powerful. But we will fight for a long time yet!"

"No!" contradicted Ellory. "The war will be over shortly, because of this!"

He held up the sword and explained.

Sharina was startled. But strangely, she also seemed unenthusiastic. Looking from one to the other, Sem Onger whispered in Ellory's ear.

"When the war is over, she marries Mal Radnor. It is the custom for the chief's daughter to marry her betrothed immediately after a war—if it is successful!"

So that was it.

Ellory looked at the sword he had forged. It would also forge certain human relationships into which he had been catapulted. And then, looking at the sweet-faced, silent girl next to him, he longed to suddenly take her in his arms, kiss her. He strained toward her once. But then it occurred to him that this would be wrong, by Twentieth or Fiftieth Century standards.

The girl gave him a faint stare of challenge, then swung lightly on her mount.

"I will hurry back and tell my father of what you have made," she said. With a last curious stare at the sword, and at Ellory, she galloped away.

SUNK in a moody cloud as their wagon lumbered back toward the city, Ellory fingered the sword in his lap thoughtfully. Suddenly he pulled up the team of oxen, before a farmer's thatched hut.

"See that horse in the field, Sem Onger?" Ellory pointed. "Get it for me. I'm off for the war!"

"What?"

"You heard me!" snapped Ellory. "I'll demonstrate the superiority of a metal weapon personally. Mal Radnor—well, never mind. Get that horse for me."

Sem Onger was blinking.

"You mean you'll take part in a battle? But Humrelly, suppose—" He paused.

"Suppose I'm killed," Ellory finished calmly. "All right. You know how to make steel now, without me. It will win the war, in any case."

New blade, new destiny; and he must wield them both himself. He could see that now.

Sem Onger remonstrated no further, seeing the set lines of Ellory's face. Promising the farmer he would be reimbursed in kind, the old seer had him bring the horse.

Ellory rode off with the animal's hooves flying.

Sem Onger stared after him, slowly shaking his head, and grinning.

"Human nature, and the fire of youth, change little, though the centuries flow by," he philosophized. "Mal Radnor had best watch his military laurels, as well as his bride!"

TO BE CONTINUED NEXT WEEK

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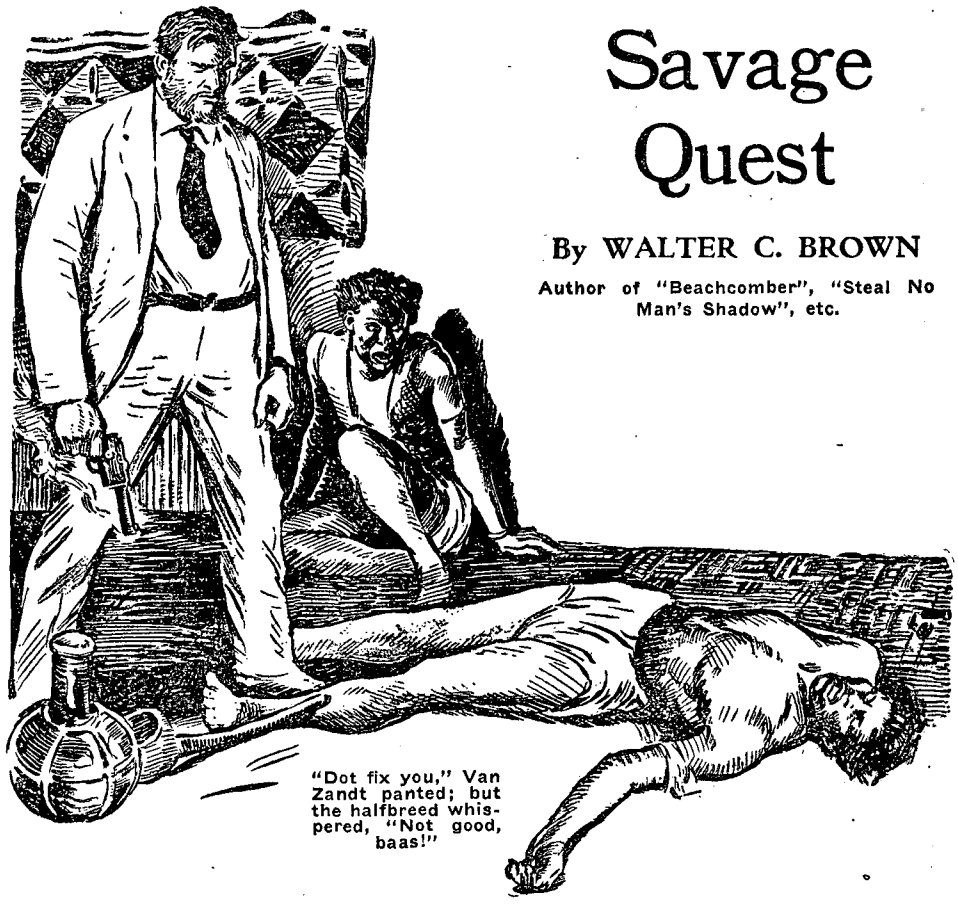
Savage Quest

By WALTER C. BROWN

Author of "Beachcomber", "Steal No Man's Shadow", etc.



"Dot fix you," Van Zandt panted; but the halfbreed whispered, "Not good, baas!"

Look, my beloved: Red hair! gold teeth! Faithfully have I brought him through the Bornu jungle, kept him safe . . .

THE extraordinary devotion of Tongu the Dyak in the service of the surly Dutch trader, Klaus Van Zandt, was a thing mysterious and utterly without precedent in the savage and lawless world of Kanjera, for in the steaming jungles of East Borneo almost anything will take root and flourish—except friendship between white man and brown.

In the first place, Tongu was a full-blooded barbarian, sprung from a race of proud and haughty warriors noted for their cast-iron aversion to what we politely call "civilization."

And Van Zandt himself was not exactly the kind of man to inspire trust and faithfulness in another—be his skin white, black, brown or yellow.

This ill-assorted friendship formed a topic for endless gossip over the chewing of betel and the puffing of *nipa* cheroots in the stilted bamboo houses of the Seputan Dyaks and the crude leaf huts of the furtive Muruts.

"Why should one man serve another?" argues jungle philosophy, "while there are fish in the waters and game in the woods? Has not Sang-Sang the All-wise raised up the *nipa* tree that the sons of Bornu may have food and drink, clothing and the smoking-leaf, all for the stretching out of a hand?"

In fact, Tongu's tireless and unswerving devotion was a cause for wonder even to

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the Dutch trader himself, who knew more of the jungle lore than it is wise for any white man to learn.

At first he had been distrustful of this friendship, because Tongu was plainly not of the Seputans, having a decidedly aquiline nose and considerably more hair than is found in the Dyak tribes along the Mahakam River.

"How you come by Kanjera-side?" had been Van Zandt's first question.

Tongu waved his hand toward the north, and the trader's red-rimmed little pigeyes hardened; that mysterious North—lair of the untamed Kenja head-hunters, where the fabled treemen lived, and man-size apes with long, drooping noses.

"You belong Kenja boy?"

"No, *baas*. Tongu's village many sleeps other side of Kenja *kotta*."

"You make lie, Tongu! Nobody fool enough to make one-man trek through Kenja-land."

The coffee-colored Hercules puffed out his chest, proudly exhibiting the livid welt of a spear-thrust through his shoulder. "That is Kenja mark, *baas*. They try to stop Tongu for take head. No can do. Tongu make plenty fight—kill two Kenja —one with spear, one with *mandau*."

"You catch heads?" Van Zandt demanded.

"No catch Kenja head. Tongu not want." The Dyak spat red betel juice at a palm lizard. "Tongu like to stay here with *baas*."

"How long? One-two sleeps?"

Tongu smiled. "As Sang-Sang wills it, *baas*. Who may tell the color of tomorrow's sky?"

The Dutch trader shook his head. "Already I haf two boys in my *kampong*. I cannot feed another. Trade is not goot."

"Tongu ask for little, *baas*—one small corner to spread his sleeping-mat and fire for his cook-pot. Tongu find his own food in the woods and in the water."

Van Zandt gave in with a shrug. "All right, Tongu, but do not prowl about at night in the *kampong*, or you catch bullet!"

"*Baas!*" Tongu saluted the unkempt and unshaven white man gravely, touching hand to forehead and then to the rich black earth. "No harm come to *baas* while Tongu stay here!"

Thus began the strange friendship of the savage Dyak and the surly Dutchman. Whatever jungle mayhem or murder Van Zandt may have suspected as the reason for Tongu'e lonely and perilous trek, he asked no questions, for if Kanjera has any charm whatever—a debatable point—it is its remoteness from the nearest branch office of the might and majesty of the Dutch Raj.

"*Dari mana tuan?*—Where do you come from?"—that universal greeting of the Islands is taboo in Kanjera, for no man, white or native, ever travels the Mahakam for anything that may lie ahead, but because of something left behind.

THE trading *kampong* was garrisoned by a strange trio who were a perfect illustration of this point. Van Zandt's own miasmic past lay buried in the South, in far-off Samarinda—a fabulous place as remote and unreal to the Seputans as *Apo Kesio*, which is the Bornean name for the hereafter.

Jan-Jan, the trader's halfbreed clerk, had come down out of the West, an impossible journey over impassable mountains and swaying rattan bridges—probably to escape the permanent hospitality of the famous White Rajah of Sarawak, who held rather inconvenient opinions on the subject of law and order.

Then there was Tuluk, a dark and brooding Bugi, who had drifted in from the East marshes in a high-prowed *tambangan* filled with dead men. After crawling ashore, Tuluk put the torch to the gondola-like boat and sent it back into the current, a blazing funeral pyre. Van Vandt had found him sitting outside the *kampong* gate in the morning, nursing a gashed thigh which no white man could have survived.

South, West and East—and now the coffee-colored Tongu from the mysterious North, who closed the circle of the compass. So the lithe-muscled Dyak began his

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sojourn at the weed-grown trading post, marking each full moon after his arrival by a peculiar sword-cut on a dead tree at the edge of the *kampong*.

There were now eleven of these notches in the scaly bark, and only Tongu himself knew the meaning of that secret tally. Haughty to everyone else, scornful of Seputan and Murut, Tongu served the vile-tempered trader with a dog-like devotion. When Van Zandt rested, the Dyak squatted nearby, watching his face. When Van Zandt moved, Tongu rose and followed as body-guard, armed with spear and sword and knife, always stepping carefully to avoid treading on his master's shadow, which would have been a deed of great disrespect.

He was absolutely tireless in his service, bringing the trader his food, his drink, a light for his cigar. For hours at a stretch he would squat on his heels, chasing flies and the deadly *anopheles* from the drunken sleep of his *baas*.

And this devotion was more than merely passive.

There was the time Van Zandt had been gored by the razor-like tusks of a wild hog, and infection had set in, so that the trader's flame of life flickered like a wind-blown candle. In lucid intervals he would dose himself with quinine and reckless draughts of undiluted schnapps, then relapse into raging, cursing delirium.

"Baas! Baas!" Tongu murmured sadly, crouching beside the bed at all hours of the day and night. Jan-Jan, frightened by the trader's wild mouthings and staring eyes, reverted to his darker blood and paddled across the river to fetch the Kanjera witch-doctor.

But Tongu had a low opinion of the power of Seputan magic, and chased the *balian* from Van Zandt's threshold with his flashing *mandau*.

"Away!" he shouted angrily, swinging the bright blade so that it whistled. "One step more and your head will drop like a ripe cocoanut when the storm-wind blows!"

And the witch-doctor turned tail and fled, with his jingling amulets of claws and painted pebbles and monkey skulls, and a *flaka* hawk perched on his skinny wrist.

"Now *baas* make die for sure!" Jan-Jan wailed.

"Balian no good for white man," Tongu declared scornfully. *"Baas* not die. Tongu fix."

Whereupon he turned and disappeared into the trackless jungle, returning on the second morning with a handful of strange triangular leaves, of a coppery green marked with dark red veins. These he stewed over a slow fire and made into a wet compress for the festering wound.

And within twenty-four hours Van Zandt had made a miraculous recovery, awaking weak but rational—for his first glance sought the black bottle at his bedside, thence to the gun under his pillow and the stock-room key hanging on a peg. Tongu's brown face grinned at him from the corner.

"Vat is dis?" Van Zandt grunted, flinging aside the odorous compress. "Somet'ing from your heathen magic, yah? It is lucky I do not catch you at it, by dam!"

Tongu smiled gently. *"Baas* catch plenty *bali djaka*. Tongu chase devil-spirits."

"Is dot so!" Van Zandt snorted. "It is the schnapps haf pull me through—goot Hollander schnapps!" His eyes fastened suddenly on Tongu's forearm, swollen and discolored. "Vat is wrong mit your arm?"

"Snake bit, *baas*. Tongu in big hurry to catch medicine leaf for *baas*—not see snake in deep jungle.'

"You are big fool, Tongu. Your magic leaf, it is nothing—schtinking rubbish." The trader's red eyes glinted slyly. "Now you t'ink I gif you big reward, yah?"

"Tongu not want *baas* to make die."

"No!" Van Zandt sneered. "I gif you one bottle rum and six stick black tobacco. Not von thing more!"

"Tongu want nothing," the Dyak replied with majestic dignity. "Tongu go now, catch one plenty fine turtle in river sand while Jan-Jan make fire ready. *Baas* eat —tomorrow *baas* strong again."

Van Zandt cast a peculiar look at this calm, impassive savage who had risk his

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life to serve him and now spurned all reward. This was something new in his experience of the ways of men.

"He is big fool, by dam!" the trader muttered as Tongu went out, his swollen arm dangling.

But Tongu's devotion to Van Zandt was destined to reach even greater heights, for there came the day when his faithful service was put to the ultimate test—the trial of race and blood . . .

BROAD blades of sunlight lanced the wall of slatted bamboo, striking fiery sparks from Van Zandt's crisp red hair and curling beard, and turning into liquid blue the stream of uncut sapphires which Rakki, a dusky-skinned Seputan, was pouring tauntingly from one palm into the other.

Van Zandt's piglike eyes stared at the flashing blue stones, hypnotized. For months the Seputan had been secretly digging the gems from a carefully guarded sand-bank somewhere along the upper reaches of the Mahakam. Whenever the trader had set foot on that side of the river, invisible sentries beat hollow sticks together to warn the digging-crew, and Van Zandt dared not venture into the tangled jungle screen.

"Tomorrow, *baas,*" Rakki said, a malicious gleam in his eye, "me go down-river in the long *prau*. China-man name King Yat in Samarinda pay plenty big price for these sky-pebbles."

"Who tell you dot?" the trader snapped.

"Ah Moy tell Rakki. He say Samarinda-man make straight talk, not try cheat Rakki with price."

Van Zandt wet his cracked lips. "I vill make you goot price, Rakki—better price than any yellow-belly thief Samarinda-side."

The Seputan wrinkled up his eyes. "You make price, *baas,* but how you make pay? In the trade-house is nothing Rakki want—it is bare like Murut hut."

Van Zandt gritted his teeth, well knowing how the damp rot, white ants, and cunning marsh rats had taken toll of such stock as had been left after a long series of fantan debts to the rascally old cheat, Ah Moy. Here was a fortune—a veritable fortune glinting and dancing before his eyes, and this grinning savage had come to taunt him, to mock his down-at-heels estate.

"I haf reach the rope-end!" Van Zandt mused bitterly, while Rakki squatted on the floor of the hut, a lean brown Buddha in a sarong of gaudy batik, his nails gilded in token of a long journey.

"Rakki go tomorrow, *baas,*" he repeated, smiling slyly. "It is a journey of many sleeps—"

But Rakki's journey was destined to start at once, for Van Zandt's eyes narrowed to reddened slits as his hand, square and hairy, clutched the butt of his Webley automatic.

"You vill not go!" the red-haired trader snarled. "No, by dam!"

Pale orange flame whipped from the steel muzzle, and a .38 bullet punched a round black hole squarely between Rakki's brows. Amazement flashed in the vivid brown eyes, then a split second of agonized horror before the life-light flickered and fled. Rakki sagged down on his back, knocking over a black bottle of schnapps.

"Dot fix you!" Van Zandt panted, and the slanted sunlight drew flashes of gold from his bared teeth. A tiny wisp of smoke uncoiled lazily from the gun barrel. The black bottle drained away with a soft *glug-glug*. Sapphires spilled across the guest-mat like gouts of bright blue blood.

With feverish haste Van Zandt began pushing the precious blue pebbles into Rakki's pouch of monkey-skin, prying open the Seputan's crisped fingers to secure the last stone. He thrust the pouch inside the dirty red cummerbund which circled his paunch in slovenly folds.

And all this while Jan-Jan, the half-breed clerk, crouched against the wall with dilating eyes, his mop of wiry hair seeming to rise slowly into a terrified bristle.

"*Baas!*" he whispered huskily. "Not good, *baas!*"

"Make still!" Van Zandt hissed.

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The sound of the pistol shot had startled a half-tamed parrot into a rushing flight of scarlet and green across the *kampong*. Its raucous screams were taken up by the *flaka*, hawks, wheeling and circling in the porcelain sky. A troop of "flying ghost" monkeys fled like grey shadows along the tops of the mangroves, with gibbering squeals, so that the jungle clamor grew as it receded, like an echo in reverse.

Then the jungle roar stopped as suddenly as it had begun. Van Zandt stepped out onto the high verandah, eyes warily searching the clearing.

Tongu was not in sight, but Tuluk the Bugi lay stretched out in the shade of the rotting jetty, a fishing-line tied to his ankle. He might be feigning sleep, or sodden with palm-wine, which was more likely. Van Zandt could hear an unbroken rhythm of *clack-clock, clack-clock* from the native village across the river.

The sound made him think of Tongu. It was almost exactly one year since the Dyak had arrived at the Kanjera post, for his coming had been marked by that same *clack-clock* of the Seputan women pounding out the rice harvest on hardwood blocks in preparation for the Tugal —the great rice feast.

AND here was Tongu now, coming swiftly across the *kampong* with his lithe, feline tread, head raised, as if sniffing the air. Van Zandt beckoned to him, and waited while the Dyak climbed the notched log which served as staircase to the stilted house.

"Insite!" Van Zandt ordered in a clipped voice, and stealthily followed the naked brown back, his hand ready on the Webley, for he was uncertain as to the Dyak's reaction to a deed of murder.

Tongu glanced briefly at the dead Rakki, whipped a sidelong look at the bug-eyed Jan-Jan, then carefully circled the guest-mat and squatted in a corner, his burnt brown face an inscrutable mask.

"Vell, say somet'ing!" Van Zandt's harsh voice split the silence. "Do you not see dot Rakki is dead!"

"Seputan no good," Tongu replied casually, and began to prepare a fresh chew of betel.

"*Baas,* now we catch plenty trouble!" Jan-Jan croaked. "Rakki is blood-brother of Kanjera chief. He will make the *djaka lali* for us—head for head! It is the Seputan law!"

"First they vill haf to catch us," Van Zandt replied. "We do not vait here like big fools—no. We leaf Kanjera—now—at vonce! Pack my t'ings, Jan-Jan. And the schnapps—efery bottle. Be quick!"

The trader cast an appraising glance at the impassive Dyak. "Tongu, better you make long trek jungle-side and not come back or you find your head on Kanjera pole!"

The Dyak stood up, tall and straight, grasping his weapons. "Wherever *baas* go, Tongu go with him," he replied firmly.

"We go far away, Tongu, to white man's *kotta*—maybe Samarinda-side."

The brown man shrugged. "Maybe *baas* like Tongu to catch *prau* and Murut boys for paddle?"

Van Zandt rubbed his flaming whiskers, thinking swiftly. "By dam, dot is goot idea. Go, Tongu!"

The trader stood on the verandah and watched the Dyak vanish into the high brush behind the decrepit *godown*. Tongu would be a useful companion on the long river flight, and at the proper moment he could be disposed of in the same fashion as Rakki, and as Van Zandt proposed to rid himself of Jan-Jan. Two more gray-nosed bullets from the Webley and the secret of Rakki's death would be sealed forever in silence.

There was the faithful river waiting for him—the jungle highway, the only road through this tangled fastness where the treacherous head-hunters lurked.

Jan-Jan gathered the trader's meagre luggage and piled it near the *kampong* gate, then presented himself once more, stammering, uneasy. "*Baas*—Rakki, how we do with him?"

Van Zandt pursed his lips grimly and returned to the death-chamber. For a few

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moments he stared at the dead man, then crossed to the far wall and kicked a jagged hole through the brittle slatting. Catching Rakki under the arms, he tumbled him out through the opening, to the rotting carpet of leaves fifteen feet under the stilted house.

"Goot!" Van Zandt picked up the overturned bottle, drained the remaining liquor in quick gulps, and flung the bottle after Rakki. By morning the sharp-toothed marsh rats would have left only a heap of bare bones, clean and white as freshly carved ivory.

Van Zandt motioned to Jan-Jan to precede him down the notched log, and left the hut without one backward glance of memory or regret. He paced to and fro, waiting for the *prau,* smoking a cheroot and smiling. With a pistol in his pocket and a fortune in blue stones under his belt he was lord and master of a whole new life, by dam!

"It is a long time, *baas,*" Jan-Jan whispered nervously. "Maybe Tongu run away with *prau,* not coming back!"

"No! No! Tongu, he is goot boy!" Van Zandt's tone was positive, but his fingers clenched and unclenched as he waited, staring at the watery gash through the massive jungle web.

Where the sluggish waters of the Tudan slid past the *kampong* to be caught up and swept along by the swifter Mahakam, the hungry jungle growth had been beaten back at three points by fire and sword. Van Zandt's station and the native village of Kanjera occupied two of these points, separated by the width of the river. The third clearing, a mere sandbar, was colonized by despised Muruts, gatherers of wild honey and tortoise shell.

Tongu had taken their only boat to reach this sandbar. If the Dyak betrayed him now—fled down the river to save his own skin, and left him marooned in this narrow green grave . . .

"HO! HERE is that Tongu! You see, Jan-Jan. The baggage! Quick!" Van Zandt cried as the *prau* glided silently in beside the jetty. Tongu had done his work well: there were eight Murut boys to paddle, and a ninth standing bare-legged on the high poop with a long flat sweep-oar for steering.

The Dyak sprang ashore and approached his master. "*Baas,* Tongu think it is better we not go away by Mahakam. Seputans on shore fixing fishing-boat. They see us go, maybe come here, look for Rakki. *Prau* go fast with eight paddles, but not quick as smoke signal or *tam-tam* drum."

"There is no choice, Tongu. Up-river is Kenja Jungle—head-hunters—"

"We go by Tudan, *baas.* If we take Tuluk for guide—he know the east-ways to the Great Water. When Seputan come station-side, nobody here to say which way we go."

Van Zandt sucked his breath. He had every desire to avoid showing himself in Samarinda where old ghosts might rise up to make trouble. All he wanted was to find his way to the sea, any part of the sea where there would be a ship to carry him away from this steaming inferno.

"Yah! We vill go by the Tudan," the trader nodded. "You are one topside smart feller, Tongu!"

Jan-Jan crawled under the jetty to arouse Tuluk, but the prostrate Bugi neither rose nor stirred to his vigorous prodding. He had consumed a gourd of palm-wine, and was unaware even of a big fish tugging on his ankle-line.

"Drink too much *tolwak,*" Jan-Jan reported, but the trader ordered him to be pulled out and tumbled into the *prau,* a limp roll of black cargo wedged between Van Zandt's baggage and a wooden box bristling with bottle-necks.

"Go!" Van Zandt commanded, waving his cheroot with a lordly gesture, and eight black paddles dipped into the sluggish water, shaking off drops that sparkled like diamonds as the *prau* glided along the Tudan, slow and sinuous as a snake, a vile-green in the shadows, a dusty gray in the white-hot sunlight.

At the first turning of the river Van

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Zandt stood up and looked back at his abandoned station. "Eight year I haf throw away in dot hell-hole," he muttered. "Too long, by dam!" The stub of his cheroot hissed as it struck the water.

Hour after hour the Muruts paddled, beads of sweat making their muscular shoulders glisten as the jungle walls unwound like an endless ribbon of ragged green silk. They came to a fork in the river, Van Zandt being familiar only with the left-hand branch, which led to a *kotta* of the Long Glats—dangerous country.

"Tuluk!" Van Zandt's boot thudded against the Bugi's ribs, but the drunken savage slept on, a cloud of sandflies dancing above his winish breath. The trader growled a curse and motioned to the steersman, and the sweep-oar guided the *prau* into the unknown channel.

A simple matter, Van Zandt told himself—bear to the east, always to the east, and one must come at last to the Great Water. A man needed only a pair of eyes and a sight of the sun as guide.

But it was not so simple, after all, for the Tudan was only a lazy ditch draining out of the Long Glat Swamp, an inland sea of shallow water-lanes hedged in by islands of flowering bamboo and great clumps of wild grasses which stood up like sheafs of spears. The Tudan lost its identity in a twisting maze of inlets and stagnant pools that set a man's head in a whirl.

"Baas!" the sharp-eyed Tongu called. "Look at *tapang!* We have pass here long time before."

Van Zandt recognized that *tapang* tree, its bark bone-white amidst the solid green, one branch reaching out, black and dead, like a withered arm. All their paddling had only brought them around in a crazy circle.

"Tuluk! Ho, Tuluk!" Van Zandt, raging and cursing over wasted time and effort, began to kick the Bugi's ribs in earnest, while Tongu splashed water up over his face, and that failing of effect, pushed the mumbling savage overside.

Tuluk sank like a stone, but came up gasping and gagging, rolling his eyes wildly as they hauled him back on board. Nor did his agitation decrease when he saw where they were and his slow-moving brain began at last to absorb the drift of Van Zandt's plan.

"No, *baas,* no!" he cried out, the *tolwak* still thick on his tongue. "East-way no good. Plenty black rocks and white water to knock *prau* into broken sticks." His arm swept in a half circle. "Kenja that way, *baas*—bad man—catch head!"

"You catch bullet, by dam, if you do not show us the way, and quick!" Van Zandt roared.

So they turned east under Tuluk's sullen guidance. The Bugi sat hunched on the poop, passing a painted prayer-stone from one hand to the other to ward off the demons of the swamp-land—the terrible *antol-holtangs,* who combine the worst features of vampire, witch and werewolf.

When twilight filled the water-lanes with its luminous greenish glow they made camp on the spreading roots of an ancient mangrove, a veritable island in itself. Fires were built to boil rice and keep away the red-and-black water-snakes.

Tuluk showed his disapproval of Van Zandt's course by holding himself aloof, taking his rice with the Murut crew. Afterwards he was busy again with his prayer-stone, muttering, muttering, muttering.

"Baas, do not trust Tuluk," Tongu whispered. "All the time he make scare-talk to Murut boys."

Van Zandt kept a wary eye on the sullen Bugi, but the Muruts seemed to pay no attention to his mutterings. They moved about, gathering large, flat leaves for bedding, and rubbed their bodies with *broatali* to discourage the myriad winged pests of the night.

With a bottle of schnapps for companion, Van Zandt kept watch over the sleeping Muruts. Tuluk had curled up in a hollow of the mangrove roots. Out in the darkness hidden things leaped and splashed; the leaves rustled eerily overhead as a snake crawled past. Van Zandt rubbed his hand over his cummerbund, where the sapphires lay hidden, and nodded, nodded . . . .

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"*BAAS! Baas!*" Tongu's voice, sharp and hissing. It was dawn, with the little fires burned away to charcoal embers —a gray ghost of a dawn with the ragged night-mist floating above the greenish scum where bubbles of marsh gas floated upward and burst.

"*Baas!* Tuluk gone! Murut gone! *Prau* gone!"

Van Zandt leaped to his feet. It was true —true! Like silent ghosts Tuluk and the Murut crew had risen in the night and decamped, taking the *prau,* but nothing else, for there was Van Zandt's baggage in a neat pile, with not even a bottle of schnapps missing.

This unexpected blow turned the trader into a bellowing madman, cursing and waving his gun as he scrambled over the thick roots of the little island, and at last kicking his baggage to pieces in the excess of his rage. A startled water-snake glided from its hole and slid into the water with a quiet *plop.*

Jan-Jan squatted there like a bewildered monkey, his wiry black mane more bristly and erect than ever. Tongu calmly rolled a piece of betel leaf, impassive to Van Zandt's thundering Dutch oaths.

"*Baas* wait here," he counseled at last. "Tongu will make trek to Long Glat *kotta,* catch other *prau.*"

Van Zandt checked his raving and ranting, weighing swift thoughts. Tuluk gone, and the Murut *prau*—and now Tongu! The Dyak might be able to find another *prau,* but would he return with it? Why should he?

It was the hardest decision Van Zandt had ever faced in the jungle, and it must be done quickly—quickly—with life or death perhaps hanging in the balance. There must be no trace of panic in his voice.

"How many sleeps for trek?" Van Zandt asked, striving to keep his voice casual.

Tongu shrugged. "Three-four sleeps, *baas.*"

Van Zandt drew a deep breath. "Yah, yah!" he said. "Be quick as you can, Tongu. I do not like dis place."

The Dyak nodded, wrapped a little rice in dry leaves and set out with casual promptness, leaping and scrambling from island to island, sounding the channels with his spear before wading, stopping once or twice to pry a gray leech from his ankle. Then he vanished, without one backward glance. . . .

On the third day the faithful Tongu came back, paddling a small *prau,* and Van Zandt ran to the water's edge with hoarse whoops of joy, like a man marooned for years on a desert isle.

It was a fisherman's *prau,* a poor thing, old an patched, with two broken paddles; but it was a boat, and it rode the water like a cork. Van Zandt felt again that he gripped life and destiny by the throat. He was in a high fever of impatience to be moving on—eastward, eastward!

But soon there was some dispute as to which direction was east, for the climbing jungle walls shut out the sun. "It is dot way!" Van Zandt insisted, leveling an arm. "You make too much north, Tongu."

"Tongu fix." The Dyak anchored the *prau* by driving the paddles deep into the mud and then strewed leaves upon the water, watching their movement to catch the almost imperceptible drift. And so the smiling Dyak quietly took charge of the expedition.

In time the current quickened, became plain even to Van Zandt's eyes. He sat back, watching the muscular play of the two naked backs, one a rich sepia, the other coffee-brown. Jan-Jan wore blisters on his hands trying to hold the pace set by the tireless Dyak.

"What is dot noise?" Van Zandt sat up, shaking off his pleasant calculations as to the probable value of Rakki's sapphires the bazaars of Surabaya or Macassar.

"Singing water, *baas,*" Tongu replied. "Soon we come to *kiham,* like Tuluk say."

The current unleashed itself as they neared the rapids, crested white water foaming and brawling over black volcanic rock, the air misty with spray and alive with the *kiham's* liquid song.

They jumped over the side, all three,

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standing knee-deep in the swirling rush of water, guiding the *prau* with their hands. But Van Zandt slipped on the rocks and the boat swung broadside on, overturning. Tongu wound his fingers into Van Zandt's thick red hair, and saved him from being tumbled headlong through the rocky passage; but half the baggage had floated away and the *prau* was badly damaged.

THEY made camp below the rapids, hauling the *prau* ashore. Tongu brought strips of bark and a thick red tree-gum from the nearby jungle and set to work patching the boat, while Jan-Jan fished through the brown water for fugitive bottles of schnapps. Van Zandt puffed a cheroot in the shade, admiring the scenery.

Despite the Dyak's anxiety to remove from that spot, they could not put the *prau* back into the water until the gummy patches had set and hardened. By that time they could do little more than paddle downstream in the failing light and shift their camp to a reedy island.

Morning came, without alarm, and they were about to embark again when suddenly the flat brown face of a Kenja pressed through the green tracery of the bank—a naked savage with filed teeth and bushy black hair held upright by a dirty yellow rag.

Perhaps his intentions were entirely peaceful—the wide-eyed curiosity of the jungle-man, a hail of *"Dari mana tuan?"* —that point can never be known, for Van Zandt snatched out his pistol and fired.

The Kenja's body came tumbling down the bank into the oozing black mud, unmoving. Tongu wasted no breath on words, but began to paddle as if the great one-horn devil of Bornu were only half a length behind, and gaining.

"More Kenja will come!" he shouted back to Van Zandt. "One Kenja-boy never go alone jungle-side!"

Tongu was quite right—there were more Kenjas to reckon with, stirred to fury by the murder of their *mandur*. They sprang from ambush a little way dowstream, where the banks narrowed. They rose up out of the ground, whooping, and swung down from the overhanging trees like angry monkeys.

A spear flashed, driving through the bottom of the *prau*. A litttle geyser of water spurted up and the boat began to settle. Jan-Jan swung at the brown heads with his paddle until he was caught and dragged over the side. Snarling, Van Zandt emptied his Webley pointblank at naked brown bodies.

And where was Tongu, the mighty Dyak warrior who had boasted of his one-man trek through all the dangers of Kenja-land? Tongu had not struck a single blow in his master's defence. At the first rush he sprang for shore, swinging from one branch to another.

Van Zandt spat out a bitter curse as he saw the Dyak reach shore and leap into the brush in a headlong dive. It was the last thing Van Zandt saw before a howling Kenja cut him down with a sweeping blow of the *mandau*.

Klaus Van Zandt awoke in darkness, the gray-black darkness of a straw hut smelling of dampness and mildew. He tried to move, and a tearing pain through his shoulder wrung a deep groan from his lips.

Something rustled in the darkness nearby, and a quavering voice whispered *"Baas!"*

"Jan-Jan!" Van Zandt tried to move again, and found that his wrists and ankles were bound. "Are you tied up, too, Jan-Jan?"

"Yes, *baas*. Plenty tight."

Van Zandt muttered a curse. "Where are we?"

"In Kenja town, *baas*. They bring us long way in *prau*—five sleeps."

"Water!" Van Zandt gasped in a cracked voice.

"No more water, *baas*. No more food. Guard say we do not need. *Baas* have kill three Kenja in fight. Tomorrow Kenja strike the *titih* bell—"

No need for Jan-Jan to complete that sentence. Van Zandt knew the meaning of the *titih* bell—a four-note carillon struck on metal bars as a death-signal. And then

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—the law of the Bornu jungle: a head for a head.

Van Zandt groaned and rolled over, pouring out curses on the cowardly Tongu for his desertion, a scathing anthology of blasphemy gathered from every tongue known to the Islands. Jan-Jan listened, believing Van Zandt had relapsed into delirium.

Later, long after sundown, Van Zandt became aware of a small, persistent sound at the back of the hut—a quiet rustling, a furtive gnawing such as a rat might make. Then a single word in the darkness, breathed rather than spoken. *"Baas!"*

"Tongu!"

"S-s-s! Make silence, *baas!*"

VAN ZANDT held his breath, straining his ears as the cautious sounds continued. The faithful Dyak had somehow managed to follow the Kenja party and was now cutting his way through the woven grass wall!

Finally Tongu slithered through the opening, and in a moment had cut their rattan bonds with the sharp little knife attached to the hilt of his *mandau.*

"Dam! I cannot move!" Van Zandt gasped. "My arms—my legs—they are like dead!"

"S-s-s! Tongu fix." The Dyak knelt beside him in the darkness, massaging his wrists and ankles. "Too much Kenja on river for fight," he whispered as he worked. "Tongu run and hide, follow Kenja boat all time, watch for chance to help *baas*—"

"You come in goot time, Tongu. Yah! Tomorrow, by dam, it is too late!"

"S-s-s! *Baas* can move now?"

Tongu guided Jan-Jan through the hole in the wall. "Crawl—crawl on belly like snake to river bank," he ordered, pointing out the direction. "Tongu follow soon with *baas.*"

The halfbreed hurriedly disappeared into the night, and the Dyak turned back to help Van Zandt through the opening. "Is it far?" the trader groaned through clenched teeth. "I do not haf the strength—"

"Tongu carry." The Dyak bent down and took Van Zandt over his shoulder like a sack of grain. He set off then, but at a right angle to the course he had pointed out to the halfbreed.

The Dyak kept behind the scattered Kenja huts, slipping from one pool of shadow to another in zigzag progress. They came to a low-roofed hut standing in ghostly seclusion, its pathway marked out by stakes tipped with the skulls of small animals. The interior was pitch-black, with a smell like burned feathers.

"Hut belong to *balian, baas,*" Tongu explained. "Kenja will not look in here—they plenty 'fraid of witch-man."

"But where is the *balian?*" Van Zandt whispered.

The Dyak chuckled. "*Balian* go for Long Sleep, *baas.* Tongu fix."

Van Zandt shivered, feeling the presence of a dead man in that oppressive darkness. "Where is Jan-Jan?"

"Tongu send Jan-Jan other way, *baas.* Kenja chase him plenty, we have chance for run away."

A cold tingling stiffened Van Zandt's flaming scalp. He felt a sudden fear of this black shadow crouching beside him in the darkness, this savage jungle-man whose fierce loyalty took treachery and murder in its ruthless stride. The rancid air of the hut made his head spin. . . .

The clear blue light of dawn seeped in through the low entrance to the witch-doctor's hut. Van Zandt found himself alone—alone save for a huddled shape lying in the far corner, covered by a grass mat.

A shadow blotted out the wedge of light: Tongu entered, swiftly, silently. "Kenja catch Jan-Jan's head," he announced simply, and crouched down inside the door.

Van Zandt was silent.

"Tonight, *baas,* we go river-side. Tongu catch tree-boat."

Through the endless hours the Dyak kept watch, motionless, *mandan* in hand, his eyes fixed on the trail through the brush. Late in the afternoon it rained, a roaring downpour that slashed through the

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foliage with the sound of tearing silk. The *balian's* roof leaked.

. . . Tongu timed their flight through the brief twilight with split-second accuracy, carrying Van Zandt along a crooked trail to the river, where he had caught a floating tree and tied it to the bank. As they pushed off in their green raft, night came down like a curtain, hiding the shore. The sluggish current gripped Tongu's tree-boat and drew it along.

Van Zandt looked closely at his surroundings.

"You make for north, Tongu," he said.

"We make east, *baas,*" the Dyak replied.

Van Zandt gestured angrily.

"It is north! Haf I not sit here all day and vatch the sun?"

"East, *baas,*" Tongu repeated, and smiled gently, as at a wilful child.

Van Zandt was too weak to pursue the argument. On they went, through sunshine and shadow, past cane and bamboo and ferns as large as trees, or between dark green tapestries woven with rattan or the deadly *ipoh* vine, whose juice supplies the poison for the blow-pipe darts.

"I am veak, Tongu, I haf not my strength," Van Zandt grumbled, but he lied, concealing the progress of his recovery. For the trader had made a remarkable discovery: his precious blue sapphires were still intact under his cummerbund.

A DARK suspicion began to gnaw at his vitals—a fear that Tongu had served him, rescued him, stood by him through thick and thin only with the object of seizing his stolen hoard. Why else had the Dyak sent Jan-Jan to his death when he might just as well have shared the *balian's* hut with them?

"I make a test!" Van Zandt decided, and set his cunning brain to work. When they poled to shore the next day, to rest from the blasting head of a vertical sun, Van Zandt was ready.

So, with a great effort at sincerity, he said:

"Tongu, you haf save my life. You are goot feller, by dam!"

The Dyak smiled at him, a warm and friendly grin. Van Zandt pulled out the monkey-skin pouch and tilted the sapphires into his palm. "Tongu, I vill gif you half my blue stones. You like dot, yah?"

"Not want, *baas,*" the Dyak replied without an instant's hesitation. "Tongu ask nothing."

Van Zandt studied him through narrowed slits, but the savage went on eating berries, indifferent to the temptation, unaware that if he had accepted the gift Van Zandt would use the hardwood club he had hidden aboard the raft, splitting his skull from behind. . . .

"Can we not make faster?" the trader grumbled as they drifted onward. "Efery day it is the same t'ing—green water—green leaf—always it is green—green—green—"

"All river come at last to the Great Water," Tongu answered.

The next day they drifted past the ruins of an abandoned *kotta,* the crumbling skeletons of houses strangled and smothered by a creeping green tide of weed and vine. The clumsy raft began to edge inshore, caught, and slowly swung around broadside to the bank. The Dyak stepped ashore.

"Tongu thirsty, *baas,* look for water on hill."

The Dyak climbed the slope and came down again. "*Baas* like drink? Run from rock, plenty good."

"Yah!" Van Zandt followed the Dyak to a rocky spring, purling pleasantly as it ran between banks of fern and under tumbling sprays of bright orange-colored flowers, where the wild bees made a drowsy humming.

"*Pohon biyou* bush," Tongu said, picking a sprig of blossoms and holding it between his teeth. "*Pohon biyou* grow in my country, *baas.*"

Van Zandt lay flat on the stones, drinking great gulps of the clear, cool water. Then he dipped his whole head into the pool, shaking the sparkling drops from

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his flaming hair and beard like a wet terrier.

"Goot, by dam!" Van Zandt said, smiling his gold-toothed smile.

Tongu stood watching him, quietly, gravely. Tongu had not told his *baas* of what might be seen from the brow of the hill—the Dyak *kotta* lying beyond the next turn of the river—and how Tongu's own village lay only a short day's journey beyond.

A full twelve-moon cycle had passed since Tongu had set out on his lonely quest. Now he was returning. He would be late for the village *Tugal,* the rice feast, but he would be in good time for the *Blako-ontong,* the marriage feast.

All the brave young warriors of the tribe would be gathered there, some proudly displaying the head of a Kenja or a Long Glat, which would give them first choice of the nubile maidens. But Tongu—Tongu himself would be the first and foremost of them all. He would have first pick, aye, even to dark-eyed Tanah, the daughter of the chief, for none but Tongu would be able to show a white man's head upon his roof-pole.

And what a head it was! A rarity—a marvel—a head bristling with fiery red hair and flaming whiskers, redder than the jungle *mias,* and with golden teeth! *Golden teeth!* It was the Dutch trader's glinting smile that had hypnotized Tongu from the first glance. For this he had planned and plotted, sweated and slaved, risking his life to pull his *baas* from the jaws of death.

Now Tongu's great moment had arrived, his moment without malice, without hate, with only a warm glow of thanks in his barbaric heart for Sang-Sang, the All-wise, who had given this great prize into his hands.

"Baas!" Tongu called softly, standing ready with his *mandau* lifted. . . .

THE OGRE OF FEAR

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"I have seen them march by night, m'sieur—these dead who will not sleep"

Remember Tomorrow

By THEODORE ROSCOE

THEY had warned him. M. Bertrand, his dead father's agent in Paris, had warned him; so had the old peasant on the battlefields just out of Amiens. They had told him not to come to this Château de Feu, in the heart of the Red Zone, where the soldier-dead are unsleeping, where yesterday's battle is tomorrow's holocaust, unforgotten, continually refought. For in that valley the slain rise from their poppy-grown graves; at night they stalk in battle formation; and they kill.

But the *château,* which he inherited from his father, was all that stood between Bill Shepherd and starvation. It had not been sold because of the ugly reputation that clung around it, situated as it was in the center of the valley where twenty-three years before had raged the bloodiest battle of the War—the Battle of the Somme. So Bill, disdainful of old wives' tales, decided to investigate. . . .

ON THE by-road near the *château,* Bill discovers the body of a dead peasant. Fingermarks on the throat indicate that the man has been strangled; but there are no footprints leading up to or away from the body. Is this one of the killings for which the restless dead are responsible?

Bill drives on. He meets a French girl, Germaine Gervais, who says she has run away from her wedding. She has no place to sleep that night, and Bill, feeling that the situation is momentarily growing to resemble a scene from one of his own mystery novels, invites her to the *château.*

There they find a dilapidated pile of stones; only about one-fifth of the rooms are available for use. Madame Landru, wife of the caretaker, at sight of him, screams: "They are here! The Forgotten of God—the undead!—they have returned!"

Bill explains who he is, and Madame Landru appears comforted. She had mistaken him for his elder brother who had been killed in battle near the *château.* Inside, they find an Englishman, Fielding, who has taken shelter for the night. At dinner, Madame Landru regales them with flesh-crawling tales of the soldiers who rise at night . . . to slay.

Presently comes a rapping on the door. Outside, rain-drenched, bloody-faced is a German, Herr Kull, also seeking refuge.

This story began in the Argosy for September 16

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He tells them of an accident that has befallen them, and begs to be allowed to pass the night.

Huddled around the fire in the bleak hall, they hear a crash, and groans. Running out to investigate, Bill hears a French voice moaning: "Help me get them out of here! The Russian—the Italian—!"

Madame Landru emits a wild cackle. "At last," she cries. "They have all returned—the American, the English, the French, the German—even the Italian and the Russian—No—they do not sleep, the dead! They are here! . . ."

CHAPTER XII

THE CANNON IN THE ROAD

AND there on that mud-swamped road with the shell-torn forest surrounding, the black rain pouring down, the lights of the wrecked bus spearing up out of the gap where the bridge had collapsed—the Frenchman in uniform outlined by the car-lights, and that French 75 gun mired in mid-road—one could believe it was the Battle of Somme. Was that muffled booming in the west the sound of thunder, or was it guns? Cries, faint groans from the wreck in the culvert were spectral. Everything was spectral in the downpour.

Bill Shepherd, peering in the rain-blear, saw the scene as something in a dream.

Yet the splash in his face was real enough. The Frenchman with the little black mustache was shouting. Someone elbowed against him, shoving him against the field gun; the cannon-barrel was cold and wet against his shoulder, undeniably solid iron.

Voices blurred and came back—Madame Landru's droning—oaths in German. Faces swam up through the rain—Archambaud's horsy countenance—Fielding's British features.

He found Gabrielle Gervais clinging to his arm—the girl had run out without a hat, and her hair was pasted to her cheek—and there was this Mauser pistol gripped in his fist, and he wasn't imagining any of it.

He heard himself crying at the uniformed Frenchman, "What happened? What happened here?"

The little man with the bloody nose was wild. "How did I know it would be washed out? How did I know the road was a wreck? Would I round a bend and expect that cannon to be blocking the road? No one told me the forest was full of artillery!"

Fielding exclaimed, "By Jove, Shepherd! I bicycled over that bridge yesterday afternoon. This cannon wasn't here—"

"Someone will pay for it," the little lorry-driver wailed. "How can I explain the loss of my transport?"

It was Gabrielle Gervais who brought Bill Shepherd to his senses. *"Mon dieu!* Cannot you do something? There are men down there in that wreck."

Somehow he found himself slipping and sliding down into the culvert. Fielding was with him. Whatever had happened in this night of crazy fantasy, the emergency was actual. The thing was like a nightmare in which reality blended with jabberwock—the background was beyond the realm of possibility, yet the thing was happening.

Here was the bridge, a pile of broken cement blocks at the culvert-bottom. Here was the wrecked bus, a shapeless heap of wheels, machinery, spare parts and scrap tin—the sort of old car one might see in a junk heap. Yet it had just fallen through the bridge; its engine was smoking; its headlamps, bent at a crazy tilt, were on; and as he stumbled toward it, Bill Shepherd discerned an old Fiat—such an antiquated, wartime bus as one saw in the flickery news reels (it came to him as a shock) reviving the scenes of 1916.

Two gray shapes struggled to extricate themselves from the wreckage. Unbelievably one was cursing in firecracker Italian.

"Aaah, Corpo di Bacco! Santa Maria! Madre de Dio—!"

Unbelievably the other poked its head out of a broken window-frame, thrust its shoulders through the bent framework and crawled out through the aperture in a jangle of broken glass. As it straightened up to a stand, brushing its arms and chest, it was swearing in Russian.

"Are you all right?" Bill Shepherd reached the gasping man.

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"And no fault of the devil who crashed us through the bridge," the answer came in thickly accented English. "I have seen bad roads in Siberia. *Da!* Nothing to this. Two hours of jolting capable of breaking one's spine, then this crash to break every bone in one's body. My ankle is badly wrenched, but I think that is all. Fortunately we Russians are thick-skulled. Here—let us rescue the Italian doctor."

FIELDING had already gone to this second passenger's aid; Bill Shepherd gave a hand to tear loose a crumpled fender and pull open the twisted door; the Italian, coughing and sputtering, was hauled out and balanced on his feet.

His felt hat was mashed down over one ear, and in the glare of the rain-glazed headlamps he looked no more than an average civilian, disheveled, badly shaken, dancing up and down and wringing the fingers of a pinched hand—as though this were any commonplace automobile accident.

Aside from the fact that Russia was a thousand miles away, the Russian, too, was unextraordinary—a stocky man in a belted waterproof coat, limping up and down and running his fingers through tousled hair in a most naturalistic manner.

The Italian was distressed about a case of medical instruments; Fielding was looking for it; if that bus had been a station-wagon instead of an antiquated Fiat, and if that 75 cannon hadn't been up there on the road, and if this hadn't happened in the Forêt de Feu, it might have been an ordinary motor crash.

Bill Shepherd found himself helping the Russian up the culvert bank, and Fielding and the Italian followed. The people on the road above the culvert resembled any little accident-crowd; the uniformed Frenchman might have been any bus-driver trying to explain.

To his surprise, Bill Shepherd heard the man call himself a bus-driver, bemoan the loss of his vehicle and curse the luck that had turned him into the forest on a detour.

"*Sapristi!* and I thought to save time. I would not listen to the keeper of the *bistro* at Thiepval. I thought to cut off ten minutes in the run to Contalmaison, and first it is the accursed mud; now this! Will someone explain that cannon blocking the road?"

It was strange to hear the little Frenchman asking for someone else's explanation.

Strange to hear Herr Kull's gruff voice in the rain, "Your army must be having troop maneuvers, but where in the devil are the artillery horses?"

The little Frenchman waved his *képi*. "I saw the cannon as I drove around that bend over there, but I did not see any horses. Sacred pipe! I jammed on the brakes. But my car was already on the concrete bridge. If I had not slowed for the accursed gun, I might have gotten across.

"*Non*, the bridge gave way with a crash. The next thing I knew we had plunged into the culvert. Did you hear the engine race and backfire as we hit the bottom? Lucky for the rain, or that wreck would be in flames. That is a ten-foot drop down there.

"Someone should pay for that—leaving up these treacherous bridges that the German army built in Nineteen-fourteen. You can see where the rain has washed out the bank and the concrete was undermined. Now I will get the blame. It is a wonder we were not all killed."

Bill Shepherd heard himself blurting, "So you drove through the woods on a shortcut for Contalmaison. The bridge caved under your car—?" And the motor-roar had only been the wrecked engine racing; the shots had been backfires from the exhaust.

"You can see for yourself where that bridge was washed out, *n'est-ce pas?* It looks as if the rain has caused a landslide."

BUT that did not explain this cannon mired in the road ruts. It did not explain the little French driver of the Fiat, or his Russian and Italian passengers. From the background of night came the

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muttered ominations of Madame Landru: "The dead have never died in the Red Zone—!" and there was that corpse Bill Shepherd had seen in the woods at eight o'clock, and nothing in the Forêt de Feu was explained.

The others were crowding around the Italian and the Russian; voices rose in a medley of French, English, German—"Are you hurt?"— "Do you feel all right?"—but Bill Shepherd's throat had become constricted; his thoughts were black cats fighting inside his head; he could only stare in unbelief at the cannon and wonder how it had come there.

People might be hallucinary, but who had ever heard of a ghostly cannon? Could a ton of iron materialize out of nothing? Even that Fiat in the culvert had been powered by gasoline—he had smelled it leaking from the broken tank. What power had dragged this field gun across the road?

The wheels were clotted with mud, as if it had come a long way through the night; but the heavy iron rims had left no track. The caisson was half-buried in the hillside. It might have charged out of the bank above the road and taken up its position there to guard the bridge. The tilted muzzle gleamed blackly in the rain.

Bill Shepherd reached out and touched the sullen metal. There it was.

He realized Fielding was at his side.

"These woods of yours are full of old artillery pieces. Some farmer must have seen this gun and thought to salvage it. Probably tried to get it out with a team, and got bogged down here in the road. Did his salvaging at night because this forest is private property."

The British were always logical. Fielding, with his coat collar up and his cap-brim lowered to shield his eyes from the downpour, was the sanest of that night's jabberwocky. He went on:

"Hadn't we better get back to the *château?* It's a bloody nuisance, Shepherd—a lot of storm-victims barging in on you, like this—that bridge going down has cut the road to Thiepval; better dry us all off, then take us in your car to Contalmaison. That's your best bet, I should say. I wouldn't fancy sitting up with the lot of us all night—I think we're getting on the nerves of your Madame Landru."

The English painter had a level head. Bill Shepherd found himself nodding his own head, which wasn't level, and everyone was moving off in the rain, mud-slogging down the road for the *château.*

Madame Landru took the lead, her coat pulled up over her hair, the others followed in a sodden group, Shepherd and Fielding bringing up the rear.

As they turned through the broken gate-posts of the *château* driveway they were like, Bill Shepherd thought, a party of shades led by a spirit medium to a séance. Or was he making this whole thing up in his mind?

As a writer he had learned to mistrust imagination; in too many instances the mental picture became more real than the actuality; was all this some caper of a brain that had been steeped too long in mystery stories?

Of course Fielding was right and some peasant had tried to drag off that cannon as a nice piece of scrap iron. Doubtless there was a reasonable answer to a Frenchman in military uniform driving a doctor from Italy and a Russian from Muscovy across the middle of Picardy in a 1916 Fiat.

And Gabrielle Gervais, who had held him up two hours ago at the point of a loaded pistol? Well, the girl must have had her reasons, although the ones she had given had sounded too improbable.

More than ever Bill pondered his part in this incredible business. No chance of being a mere spectator.

He should have first solved that strangled corpse in the poppies; that murdered peasant was at the bottom of his panic. He resolved to speak to Fielding about it as soon as they were indoors; it would be a relief to get that one dead man off his mind.

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CHAPTER XIII

THE VANISHING DOG

BUT everyone was talking at once as they crowded under the porte-cochère; the last one out had left the door open, and they jostled in out of the wet, filling the dim-lit room with the excitement of their voices.

He had no immediate chance to speak to Fielding. The Englishman, anxious to help, was assisting the limping Russian to a chair. Gabrielle Gervais had volunteered some sharp-spoken dialect to Madame Landru that sent the old Frenchwoman muttering to the kitchen. Archambaud clumped after his wife, obviously glad to get out of the picture. As he shut the door against the rain, Bill Shepherd heard himself being introduced to the Italian by Herr Kull.

The German was saying: "Herr Shepherd, here, is the master of the *château.* I, too, suffered an accident this evening. My horse threw me in the woods. It is Herr Shepherd to whom we are indebted for this haven."

The Italian had been handing his coat and hat and a little black bag to the driver of the Fiat. He gave William Shepherd a stiff bow.

"May I present myself? I am Doctor Arnoldo. This lady," he turned expectantly toward Gabrielle Gervais, "is your wife?"

The girl spoke up quickly, "I am Mademoiselle Gervais. Monsieur Shepherd was kind enough to rescue me from a ditch where I had stalled my car earlier this evening."

Doctor Arnoldo commiserated; "So you also have suffered from the storm." He smiled formally at the girl; drew a pair of pince-nez glasses from his waistcoat, and attached them to his nose; and somehow, despite muddied trousers and mussed hair, became dapper, suave and professional.

He inspected the room coolly, his glance returning to Bill Shepherd with polite appraisal. "It was good of you to come to our rescue, *signor;* I do not like the thought of spending the night in that forest. I have heard of how it rained in this part of France, but *Madre Maria!* it was as if the road from Thiepval was under a waterfall. And what a road!"

"The main highway to Contalmaison is flooded," the Fiat-driver complained. "I was only trying to detour from a dangerous route."

Doctor Arnoldo said agreeably, "For myself, I am grateful the mishap was not worse. I entered Thiepval Village by ambulance; I am glad not to be leaving by one. Indeed, had I not taken your omnibus, I might have been killed, for I was intending to leave by plane. Naturally," he said to Bill Shepherd, "I did not care to fly on such a night."

"Naturally," Bill Shepherd said.

"I would have flown in a plane any time in preference to that bus," the Russian, who had taken a chair by the fireplace, spoke up. He grunted, bending over to unlace a muddy shoe. "Uh! I have gone up in weather much worse than this. You die more quickly by plane," he grunted.

Herr Kull interjected the question that had numbed on Bill Shepherd's tongue. "You are an aviator, *mein Herr?*"

"I have a pilot's rating," the Russian nodded, kicking off his shoe and gingerly fingering his ankle. "In such a country as this you are safer in the air than on the ground. These French fly much better than they drive. I should have had more sense than to risk my life in that Fiat."

"It was a fine car," the little French driver lamented. "It had seen a lot of service, but the motor was in excellent repair. Blame these miserable wartime roads, but do not blame my poor car—*non,* I feel as if I had lost a baby. And look"—he regarded himself unhappily—"at the grease on my tunic, the mud on my *képi.* The commandant at the station will take my head off."

BILL SHEPHERD'S own head was woozy. His brain had stalled. He wanted to account for these people distributing themselves about the shadow-

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walled room—people who took off wet coats and mopped their faces and dropped into chairs as would anyone under the circumstances.

Yet just when their conduct seemed natural, the Italian spoke of entering the district by amblance, the Russian confessed himself a pilot, the little Fiat-driver bemoaned the "wartime roads" and spoke apprehensively of "the commandant."

Bill Shepherd heard the Italian doctor saying: "The fellow worries about mud on his uniform and the loss of that rattletrap motor. Me, I will only miss tomorrow morning's train to Paris. I have given my fingers a bad pinching, too. That is what I get for coming all the way from Milano with a surgical case, an idiotic old army general with a cranial concussion.

"Not another surgeon in Italy could perform a trephining as difficult; now I will not be able to operate with these fingers" —he held them up aggrievedly—"for at least three weeks."

"Would the doctor mind examining my ankle?" the Russian looked around to ask. "I think it may be sprained."

Gabrielle Gervais said in an aside to Bill Shepherd, "I sent the old woman after more hot water and soap. I think I can help the doctor if necessary; I used to be a nurse."

The place was assuming the aspect of a Red Cross station.

Fielding had found a log in a nook by the fireplace and thrown it on the grids. Herr Kull with his raw-scratched forehead, and the little Fiat-driver with a nosebleed, moved closer to the hearth. Doctor Arnoldo knelt to inspect the Russian's ankle. And Gabrielle Gervais became a nurse.

As he started automatically toward the table to offer the brandy bottle, Bill Shepherd would not have been surprised to see ten dead infantrymen littered on the staircase and a Prussian officer bayonet-pinned to the grandfather clock.

Then he realized the Russian was addressing him.

"Sir." The lamed man turned in his chair to gesture. "I have neglected to introduce myself to you, and doubtless you think me a boorish guest. Please attribute my bad manners to this devilish sprain, and know how much I regret putting you to inconvenience. I am Myroslav Pavlovich Putinov, Professor of Metaphysics and Psychic Research from the State College at Tomsk."

Bill Shepherd swallowed. "Professor of Metaphysics and Psychic Research—Tomsk—?"

The Russian smiled. "People appear surprised when they hear of a university in Siberia. Tomsk has one of the biggest libraries in the world." He grunted amiably. "Really, we Russians are sometimes quite civilized. We are not all Cossacks by any means."

"I—I thought you were an airman."

"Because I said I was a pilot? That is only in line of duty; in civilian life I am merely a college professor. At present I am—how do you phrase it?—on furlough. It is psychic research that brings me to this country."

He included the others with his glance. "I am making a study of the psychic phenomena, the metaphysical experiences of troops at wartime. If I survive long enough," he regarded the Fiat-driver caustically, "I will complete a volume on the subject. Doubtless I should have remained in Tomsk with my books. I did not anticipate being killed on these battlefields of France."

"Nor I," Doctor Arnoldo added. "I am sorry I left Italy to accompany that idiotic old general in his ambulance. But he was rich and insisted, afraid he might die on the journey. Fate takes him safely to his family at Thiepval, and I, the surgeon, suffer the dangerous accident."

BILL SHEPHERD wanted to sit down with relief. What a fool your imagination made of you in the face of simple facts! This Russian was a college professor on leave, in France doing research work. The doctor had brought a patient in an ambulance from Italy.

They were travelers like Herr Kull—

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like him, himself—and no more ghostly than Fielding.

To the Russian and the Italian, the little Fiat-driver was complaining sullenly, "Well, you did not have to ride in my bus. The commandant at the bus-station told you the Contalmaison Road was flooded. I would not have set out, but I have never before missed the schedule, and I wanted to keep the record. Always before I have come through the Forêt de Feu in safety. There is no better driver in France than Marcel Tac."

Bill wanted to laugh.

This grease-smeared little bus-driver named Marcel—in the technique of drama it was known as low comedy relief. People invariably reminded Bill Shepherd of birds or animals; the black-eyed Frenchman was a ruffled rooster, and Marcel wasn't the name you expected from a bantam.

Doctor Arnoldo was more in keeping; the man was sleek and a little like a cat; while Putinov just suited that Russian, who had hairy hands and bushy eyebrows and a thick black mop, and resembled, symbolically, a grumbling bear.

And there was Madame Landru in that doorway at the back, looking like death!

Bill Shepherd's scalp went tight again as he saw the woman was signaling him with a witchlike finger, and he hurried around the table to find out what she was staring at now.

"There is someone in the *château,*" she told him in a croaking undertone. "Someone who came in while we were out. I can hear someone moving about in the room above the kitchen. And the dog is gone."

CHAPTER XIV

NONE BUT THE GHOSTS

FIELDING caught Bill Shepherd's beckoning look and joined him in the passageway. Bill Shepherd muttered, "Look here, Fielding, I may want your help for a minute. It's probably nothing, but I don't want to bother those others. The old woman thinks there's a prowler in the place."

The Englishman made a reassuring sign, and they hurried down the narrow passage to the kitchen.

Bill Shepherd was glad of Fielding's company as he entered that arch-ceiled *cuisine.* It was not the homely kitchen of American standards, a friendly workshop for cook and matronly housewife.

This kitchen was cavernous; a brick-floored chamber, dank, engloomed, its corners too far away for the feeble rays of a single oil lamp. There was a vast brick oven built into the wall, and bins for vegetables ranged alongside, and a vast array of kettles and cauldrons and iron cookpots hanging under the eaves.

Shelves of crockery sent faint gleams from an alcove; in the middle of the floor stood a massive, rough-hewn table, bumpy-surfaced like a meat cutter's table in a butchershop; there was a smell of dead fires and stale cookery.

Bill Shepherd couldn't decide whether the atmosphere, with that vast brick oven, was that of a crematorium, or—with that chopping table and those cauldrons—a torture chamber.

At any rate, it wasn't a domestic scene with Archambaud standing against the wall as though rooted in his wooden shoes, and Madame Landru posed in mid floor, saucer-eyed, her finger pointing at the ceiling.

"Listen, *messieurs.* Listen—!"

Shepherd and the Englishman listened.

"There it is. *Voilà!* Now!"

Listening, they heard overhead what sounded like a rattle of loose plaster, a faint moan, the creak of a door-hinge.

Archambaud whispered steamily, "There is a crack in the ceiling, a place where the bricks are broken, that is why we can hear."

"*Ssshhhhh,* idiot!" Madame Landru glared. "Would you have the spirits come down here after us?"

Fielding whispered, "There's a prowler on the upper floor, all right."

"And no one in the *château* except Archambaud and myself," Madame Landru breathed. "That is," she looked at Fielding, "until you and these others came."

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Bill Shepherd set his teeth. "I'm going up there. Give me that lamp. Is there a stairway at the back here, or do I have to go by the front?"

Archambaud pointed at a door dimly visible at room's end. Fielding said quietly, "I've got a flashlight," and producing one from his pocket sent a small ray at the indicated door.

Bill Shepherd said to the oggle-eyed Archambaud, "Come out of that, you're going with us. You know the upstairs; I don't. I'll be right beside you with the lamp. Lead the way."

He could hear the old caretaker's teeth clicking as he opened the stair door and disclosed a steep flight of stone steps. His own teeth weren't any too courageous. He kept his right hand in his pocket on the Mauser pistol, and held the oil lamp in his left, and gave Archambaud a knee-shove to start him up the climb.

THE stairway made a hairpin bend, and Archambaud had to stop and cross himself before going on up. A door at the top was closed. "Shall I open it, *monsieur?*"

"Does it open into a corridor?"

"Into a bed chamber," Madame Landru's voice floated up from the rear. "It has not been occupied since Nineteen-sixteen. But perhaps its former occupants have returned. A colonel of the Prussian Guard and two French officers of the *Chasseurs Alpines* were killed by shellfire while sleeping in there."

Bill Shepherd muttered, "Damn!" under his breath, and opened the door with a kick.

Dust swirling at him out of darkness was ghostly, and black shades fled across the room as he entered, racing to escape the yellow lamp. He stood across the threshold, swearing. But whatever had prowled in that chamber was gone. The shades were only shadows and the wraiths were puffs of white plaster-dust.

A door at the front of the room hung ajar on a broken hinge, and the footpad must have made an exit that way.

But the room looked as if it had not been entered for years. The windows were boarded over, and a gap in the ceiling was covered with heavy timbers. Glass and chunks of broken masonry were strewn across the floor; one corner was stacked with odd pieces of furniture and trash; bed-springs stood upright against a windowsill; under the gap in the ceiling there had been a landslide of plaster, and every thing in the room was gauzed over with cobweb or coated with a thick, gray-white powder.

"False alarm?" Fielding's voice behind Shepherd was cheerful.

"Nothing here," Bill Shepherd elevated the lamp. He gave a winded laugh. "No footprints in the plaster or hand-marks on that door, but—there's something for you. Look there by the door. Dog-tracks!"

"Sure enough." The Englishman spotted them under the white circle of his flashlight. "You can see where the animal came in from the hall, trotted around the room. Look, he sat down at this stair door; then went out by the front way. George! That moan was a dog-whine. And when he went out he moved that broken door on its hinge."

Bill Shepherd handed the lamp to Archambaud. "Nothing but your hound. He came upstairs while we were out on the road, and tried to get down the back way. Why the devil didn't you know it was your beast?"

"Theophile does not often leave the kitchen," Archambaud murmured.

"Theophile! Is that the name of your dog?"

"And a splendid watch-dog he is," came Madame Landru's drone. She was framed with her goitre at the top of the back stairs, finger pointing into the gloomed room. "Dogs can see what we do not; dogs can tell with a seventh sense. Theophile would not have come from below had he not known someone was here. The dog scents a track that we do not see. There are those in the Forêt de Feu who do not leave visible tracks."

It jarred on Bill Shepherd's nerves. There had been no wheel-ruts left by the

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cannon in the road; no murderer's footprint near that dead man in the poppies. He opened his mouth to tell the old woman to close hers; then shut his teeth with a snap.

In some far wing of the *château* the dog was howling.

Yah-wooooooo—!

THE howl echoed eerily through the *château's* mildewy upper stillness, a long-drawn ululation that sounded as if it had traveled through many galleried rooms and corridors, across high balconies and down successive flights of winding stairs before it arrived, faint and weak, in that bed chamber over the kitchen.

As Bill Shepherd listened, the howl was repeated. Then a third time, more prolonged. He recognized it now as an urgent baying. He had heard hounds bay like that in the pine woods in Maine when they had some animal treed.

He flung at Archambaud: "Where's that dog?"

The man's hobby-horse eyes bulged in fright. "It sounds as if he was somewhere in the tower wing. *Parbleu!*"

"I'm going to find out. Lead the way with that lamp! Get a move on!"

White dust smoked up under their shoes as they crossed the devastated room; the hinge screamed dismally as Bill Shepherd pulled open the door; a gust of stale air breathed into his face as he stepped out into a corridor.

Lamplight wiggled its way down the corridor to reveal a balcony at the far end, and white-toed dog tracks led them on. Their shadows ran along the wall with them as they advanced down the passage, and the dog—the sound seemed to come from a mile away—was baying like the hound of the Baskervilles.

Emerging from the corridor, they came to a wide mezzanine; the lamp-gleams picked out a marble balustrade at the head of a broad staircase, and Bill Shepherd knew they were on a balcony overlooking a great hall.

The caverned dark in front of him was like night in a closed museum; Archambaud's sabots, clacking on a floor of tile, raised answering echoes, and his hoarse voice interrupted a silence that might have been long unbroken by human speech.

"Be careful here. There are gaps in the floor. The balcony is littered with obstructions. This," he groaned, peering around at the darkness, "was the main hall of the *château*. Ah, what could anyone want in here now? There have been no visitors since the Invasion."

"None but the ghosts," came Madame Landru's droning undertone. "I have heard them in here before. They use this hall for their headquarters, even as the living generals gathered here to map their battle-plans. They are in here tonight—the Forgotten of God!"

If ghostly generals gathered anywhere to map their battle-plans, this hall, Bill Shepherd told himself, was certainly the place for such a conference.

Fielding was switching his flashlight across the balcony, and the white ray, spearing through blackness, journeyed across a desolation of havoc, ravagement and ruin. Fire and earthquake had been here.

The balcony at a distant end was caved and twisted like an old wooden dock. There were gaps in the balustrade where the marble bannisters had been smashed as though by a vandal's sledge. The ray followed the railing to a wall that was fire-smudged and pitted; dropped hastily to the floor below, and circled off across mounds of wreckage.

Tiles were scattered everywhere like shot clay pigeons; everywhere there were piles of broken plasters, junk-heaps of smashed furniture, dumps of trash and rubble and kindling.

From wall to wall the great room was scattered and strewn—carpets torn up and thrown aside; mahogany tables overturned; chairs and divans piled together; a great grand piano with its legs in the air; in the center of the floor a vast hummock of bangles and glass that had once been a pendent chandelier.

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Mold and rust had added their smell to corruption. A line of tall windows at the side had been boarded over, and a great breach in the front wall patched with lumber, but rain and weather had leaked in; water ran in rivulets down the scarred walls, there was a vast puddle at the foot of the staircase, and here and there the ceiling was dripping.

Fielding said, "Whew!" The flashlight ray had stopped on a figure that was standing at the curve of the staircase. A knight in armor leaning on his mace! The visored helmet was bowed in contemplation; the mailed fingers were folded on the axe-head. He might have come there from seven hundred years ago to view the demolition of modern war. In the Middle Ages he had never seen anything like the destruction he beheld below.

Bill Shepherd pulled a sharp breath at sight of this watcher. But Archambaud said huskily, "That is only a suit of armor. It was worn by the *Grand Seigneur,* the Charles of Picardy who was here the first *châtelain.* Ah, this was a fine hall before it was destroyed. If you could have seen it before this *délabrement—!*"

It was no moment to pause over toppled grandeur and ravished magnificence. Bill Shepherd rasped, "That dog—! Get on!" But he couldn't help a stomach-twist of emotion as he followed the old caretaker to a corridor at the end of the balcony—an emotion of horror at the wreckage.

TAPESTRIES torn to rags, statuary pulverized, flooring ripped up, things trampled and half-burned and smashed to kindling and dismantled—what a mad, inhuman fury must have once raged unchecked through here. The devastation was senseless. What end had been gained by gouging those holes in the wall? What cause had been served by tearing a plumbing-pipe out of the plaster, mutilating a teak-wood cabinet, hurling a settee into a marble fireplace, shattering a great jardiniere?

The havoc had not been confined to this hall.

Insane furies had swept through the rooms beyond. Archambaud led the way down the corridor to a library where the ceiling had crashed in, and books, dumped from their shelves, were smothered under the avalanche of rubbish that had been furnishings in the room above.

The lamp and flashlight made strange and senseless discoveries. A four-poster bed and a commode in the library. Volumes of Rousseau, Montaigne, Molière, Hugo, Baudelaire strewn down the hall. The library table up-ended in the drawing room, and a bathtub exposed nudely in the midst of a clutter of gilt-legged chairs.

The drawing room had a ceiling, but it lacked a sidewall; and they walked in and went through the gap to get into the room beyond because the corridor was blocked up with sandbags. This room had been a parlor.

The furniture had been removed, but the pictures had been left on the wall, pretty ladies in big hats smiling from gilt frames, and charming landscapes and garden scenes. There was a black hole in the ceiling, and a shovel in the middle of the floor; on the carpet someone had been mixing cement.

They climbed a stairway to the floor above and found their heads exposed to rain. Here the rooms were gutted, the outer walls shot through with jagged holes that let in the downpour and the night. There was a succession of empty bedchambers; then surprisingly a room choked with saddles, harness and riding equipment, useless and fire-charred; more empty rooms. Another stairway brought them to the chateau's top floor.

They proceeded carefully, for in many rooms here the floor had caved. The rooms were like jungles full of broken brick, collapsed timber and masonry. Doors were burst and walls and windows gone.

Bill Shepherd would never forget one room where the limb of a tree reached in through the window like a great black arm, and they had to claw their way to get through the branches and foliage.

Trees growing in through windows—beds

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in the library—bathtubs in drawing rooms —chimney bricks at the bottom of a flight of stairs— the *château* had the atmosphere of one of the mad poems of Baudelaire, whose volumes littered that lower corridor. One could believe a horde of apes had run with axes through the halls, rampant. They had chopped and battered and breached the walls, and they had been followed by swarms of monkies with torches who touched fire to whatever the apes had missed.

Bill Shepherd had seen such glimpses of wanton destruction in news reels of Shanghai and Madrid. He had heard of the freakish tricks of shellfire; and he had been prepared to see considerable ruin. But ruin furred over with mold and decay was more disheartening than the wreckage in the news.

The *château* was worse than the forest where the saplings had grown as camouflage. Its wounds had been neglected and gangrene had set in. It was like those ghosts old Madame Landru was mumbling about—neither buried nor reconstructed, a haunt from Nineteen-sixteen carrying on with the Battle of the Somme.

"Get on with it!" he gave Archambaud a nudge. At every doorway and corridor-bend the horse-eyed Frenchman had balked; it had taken some driving to get him up that last flight of steps.

"Theophile!" Archambaud panted. "He has stopped."

CHAPTER XV

A HERO IS DEAD

IN THE trip through these halls of destruction, occupied by darkness and demolishment and spiders and rats, Bill Shepherd had almost forgotten the dog howls leading him on. Now he was aware the hound had gone silent.

"There goes his track," Fielding spotted the toe-marks with his flashlight. "Be careful, Shepherd. The floor here is shaky. You can't trust shell-shocked buildings like these. A jar, and you might drop through three floors to the cellar."

Shell-shocked. That was a good description of these ruins. The floor up here was as shaky and treacherous as scaffolding. Many of the rooms were open to the sky, their black walls starkly silhouetted against the night.

The rain had temporarily quit, and you could look up and see green-black clouds surging across a watery moon. In places the roof was a skeletal framework, and there were areas where the slating remained undamaged.

These mansards and undermined floorings were perilous. The dog-tracks wove about through the wreckage, and the men, following, picked their way cautiously through tangles of collapsed timbering and across fire-eaten floors.

Madame Landru brought up the rear, mumbling sombre memories of air raids and bombardments. They clambered over piles of slate and residue and climbed between broken chimneys and roofless gables. Archambaud seemed to know where the going was secure—the dog had chosen a sure-footed route—and they came at last to an enclosed chamber where the ceiling was buttressed up with massive stone arches and the walls had not been breached.

The dog-tracks trotted about the room and clustered at the backwall, as if the beast had walked in circles there. Archambaud lifted the lamp, peering anxiously. Fielding let his flashlight play about the corners. The dog and whatever he might have hunted there were nowhere in sight. Only an empty chamber full of night wind and shadows and dog-tracks.

"See," Madame Landru whispered. "The dog has followed someone we have been unable to see. He comes up here to this room underneath the tower, and howls."

Bill Shepherd looked around. "This room is under the tower?"

The old woman nodded, pointing up. "The Norman tower. It rises above us, another fifty feet. Alone of this quarter of the *château* it withstood the terrible shelling."

"And the dog comes up here and howls?"

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Madame Landru nodded, "A number of times before. Archambaud and I have come up from the kitchen to find out why. We have never seen the intruder, but the dog has seen him—the dog knows where he has gone. Always the dog sits in front of that wall and bays his soul out."

"He is not here now," Archambaud peered nervously. "Theophile—!" he raised a quavering call. "Where are you, Theophile—?"

Fielding said quietly, "Your Theophile went out through that side passage over there. Probably he chases big rats or rodents from the forest or something up here. At any rate, it looks as if he's gone back to the kitchen."

"So," Archambaud looked hopeful. "*Oui,* there is a stairway down to the ground floor at the end of that passage. It is choked up with rubbish and in some places the steps are gone, but a dog would be able perhaps to use it. Very likely. Doubtless it was that he was chasing rats."

"Comedian!" Madame Landru gave her husband a glare. "There are dog tracks left by his feet which have walked in plaster dust. If it was a rat he pursued, there would also be rat tracks."

Fielding suggested, "A bat, then. He might chase up here after bats he has hounded from the rooms below. There's a big one, right now, on that wall up there."

HE SPOTTED the nocturnal creature with a circle of white light from his pocket-torch—a large bat high up on the backwall, its devil-wings spread, like a great black butterfly. Startled by the light, the creature detached itself from the wall like an animated shadow; came flying across the room in a series of eccentric dives.

Madame Landru shrieked, throwing her coat over her hair, and Bill Shepherd struck at the whizzing thing as it circled his face. Squeaking and fluttering, it shot out through a portal and vanished into blackness beyond.

"You should not have done that," Madame Landru gasped. "There will be a death in the family if you strike a bat. Besides, you do not know. They say these bats are the mascots of the dead—the messengers in the armies of the slain—the carrier-pigeons in the battles of the Forgotten of God. Perhaps he was waiting there on that back wall for a message. A message," she pointed, "from the one whom the dog followed tonight—the one who went through that tower door."

Bill Shepherd couldn't see any tower door. The old woman's finger indicated the rear wall. The wall was blank.

Archambaud said huskily, "My wife means the door that was there, *monsieur.* One entered the tower through a door in that wall, and a circular flight of steps ascends to the room high in the turret. The door is sealed up with plaster, Monsieur Shepherd. It was your father's order that the tower be closed, the door sealed over."

Stepping forward, Bill Shepherd could make out a spread of gray plaster across the older stonework. He said in an uncomprehending tone, "My father gave orders the door was to be sealed?"

"I did it myself," Archambaud nodded. "I can show you your father's letter of instruction. It is only a thin covering of plaster that can be easily broken through if you wish to open the door and enter the tower. The turret remains in a remarkably undamaged condition. A thousand shellings failed to make a direct hit. This is the old part of the *château,* and the tower walls and foundations are very strong. *Enfin,* your father wished the tower closed."

Bill Shepherd stared at the wall where the door had been sealed. "Why?"

"They say it was in the tower that your brother died, *monsieur.*"

"Hugh—?" Instinctively Bill Shepherd made a backward step from the wall.

Archambaud's face lengthened mournfully behind the lamp. "I did not see it. My wife did not see it. It was the day when the bombardment was at its worst. You would not blame us for hiding in the deepest wine cellar?"

Bill Shepherd gestured impatiently. "What about my brother?"

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"CAPTAIN SHEPHERD, monsieur, was a fine officer—one the most brave. Myself, I thought the War was over when he arrived at the *château* with a company of Canadians. My wife and me, he treated us as old friends.

"We brought out the best champagne, such a few bottles as we had been able to hide from the German thieves, and we prepared those Canadians and your good brother a magnificent meal. *Ah-la-la,* the next day the German guns began their counter barrage.

"Blanche and I retired to the cellars, but even there the thunder was like the Day of Judgment. For three days the blasting lasted, and it was in that bombardment that your brother was reported missing."

The old caretaker sighed and shook his head. "My wife and I never saw him again. There were so many bodies, you comprehend—but you imagine how it was in those rooms which you have just seen. For hours the Red Cross and ambulance men sorted and dug and hunted. Several officers said they had seen Captain Shepherd hit. It was established he had been struck in the leg and carried into that library you saw. But the ceiling crashed there, and the wounded were taken to another room.

"An officer in that quarter said Captain Shepherd had a shattered arm. A rush of Prussian Guards charged the *château* at one hour when the shelling was lifted, and it was impossible for the Canadians to escape to the rooms below.

"They said your brother with others of the badly wounded was carried finally up to this tower which was withstanding the shells. But airplanes came over with gas bombs. In the confusion of a gas attack the Red Cross men were ordered from the tower. Then there was heat from the burning rooms, and much dust and smoke. Afterward—?"

Archambaud stopped speaking with lifted shoulders.

"They said he died in the tower," Madame Landru muttered. "There was a stretcher-bearer who said he had left Captain Shepherd dead in the tower. But the bodies that were brought down, you could not recognize them. The heat and gas—!"

"They were all carried quickly away," Archambaud remembered. "The ambulances came and went with the wounded in constant traffic. The dead went away in truckloads, hour after hour. The Canadians charged back in. There were other bombardments — other counter-attacks. There was no time to pay respects to the dead in that first month of the Battle of the Somme."

Bill Shepherd turned away from the sealed wall with a heaviness in his heart. There was no time to pay respects to the dead now.

Too many had lost their lives in this charnel house to admit any feeling of personal bereavement. In the years since the War, Hugh's personality and character had faded in memory like a boyhood myth—this plastered-up wall and shell-torn ruin, and even the photograph of Hugh, had failed to revive a sense of close relationship.

Bill Shepherd could feel his father's presence in this wreckage more strongly than that of his brother. Hugh had been here and gone in one breath of cataclysm, but Old Bill's heart had been buried here—entombed in grief behind that sealed wall.

"Let's get out of here," Bill Shepherd rounded and spoke harshly. "There's no prowler here; that dog was only chasing bats. Come on, we've got to get back below with the others."

His mood was a mixture of relief, chagrin, *malaise.* Relief that no lurking footpad had been found. Chagrin at having chased off at the summons of a dog-howl. Uneasy because the evidence of death had filled his mind with formless dreads.

IT WASN'T the old woman's mumbling—that was picayune idiocy, to be ignored. He knew Madame Landru was mentally unbalanced; and he didn't wonder, considering the War experiences she had been through and the years she had spent afterward steeped with her husband in the

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dismal atmosphere of these unreconstructed walls.

The couple had been here for twenty-three years, and one night in these ruins was enough to have you haunted. The ruins themselves were a consequence of madness.

As the party picked its way cautiously down to the floors below, Bill Shepherd went angry and cold in turn at the aspect of human violence.

Shellfire hadn't destroyed these walls. Men had destroyed them. Neither apes nor monkeys had burned and battered these rooms—men had gutted them, deliberately and fiendishly, training their giant engines of destruction on this mark, giving the orders to fire and smash, working with all the science at their command to blast apart what they had built.

All over Picardy this blasting and smashing had gone on; the Forêt de Feu was another evidence of man's handiwork; the Red Zone cemeteries a final achievement of insanity. One conceived in this *château* a picture of mankind gone stark berserk; hordes of maniacs hurling themselves at each other's throats; a whole world degenerated to demonism.

It was enough to make you look sideways at your neighbor; if he had run amuck yesterday and plunged into a revelry of homicide, what assurance had you that he wouldn't turn berserk here tonight?

Bill Shepherd caught himself glancing at Fielding; checked himself sharply. No time for this sort of philosophizing. No place to start an analysis of War. Think of this *château* as an historic ruin, not an evidence of mankind's cruel vandalism. See the War cemeteries as lawns set with beautiful white crosses—forget the thousands of corpses moldering under them. That murdered peasant in the poppies was the important problem. No, the important problem was the murderer—

They were passing the library, and a rat dashing out of a nest of torn books and racing between Bill Shepherd's ankles cut his line of thought. He sprang sideways, startled by the scurry.

Fielding said, "Take it easy, old man."

He paused to handkerchief from his forehead a rush of prespiration. "Sorry, Fielding, you must think my behavor damned odd." He put a confidential hand on the Englishman's arm. "My nerves are all wearing through my skin. I saw something on the road, driving out here tonight. I think I'd better tell you—"

"Was it a dead man?" Fielding asked.

CHAPTER XVI

VICTIMS OF THE RESTLESS DEAD

MADAME LANDRU and her husband were a few feet ahead; Bill Shepherd dropped his tone out of their hearing on a tense-whispered, "How did you know?"

"Mademoiselle Gervais told me."

"Mademoiselle Gervais!"

Fielding nodded, meeting Bill Shepherd's consternation with level gray eyes. He said in a low voice, "The French girl saw him, Shepherd. A dead peasant lying by the road. In a patch of poppies. He wore a blue smock and wooden shoes, if it's the same one you—"

"Of course! The girl must have driven into the forest an hour or so ahead of me. I saw the prints of her tires in the mud. And she saw the peasant too." He narrowed his eyes. "Why didn't she tell me? How did she happen to tell you?"

"I suppose she didn't tell you for the same reason that you didn't tell her," Fielding assumed. "You didn't know she'd seen him, and you didn't want to alarm her, isn't that it?

"Well, her story is that she passed this dead man in her car. Too frightened to stop, of course. In her panic, she drove on at top speed and ran herself into a ditch. She told me all this a little awhile ago when we were running down he road to that bus accident."

"She didn't say a word about it to me. Fielding."

"When you drove up behind her in the forest there, she'd been sitting in her ditched car too scared to budge. She saw your lights coming, and she pulled out a pistol her uncle or somebody had happened

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to leave in her car. Natural thing, I suppose—forest at night—stranger approaching—rainstorm and all that."

"But why didn't she tell me she'd seen—?"

"You frightened her. She says she asked you who you were, and you went rambling off in a strange way about the literary profession and life in general. I take it she thought you were—eh—a bit balmy."

Bill Shepherd declared in a savage undertone, "I was kidding her. I thought it was a stickup. I was trying to talk her off her guard."

"So I assumed when she told me about it. A European wouldn't understand American kidding. The girl says you grabbed her gun. I guess she wanted me to know you were armed with a pistol. Anyway, that's the story she gave me when we followed you out to that bridge. She wanted my advice about you.

"I must say, I was a little taken back; I'd rather imagined you and the girl were —pardon the presumption—old friends. I told her I thought you were right as rain, and that you belonged here — we're all strangers more or less in the same boat, and that I'd speak to you about the dead man."

"Did she explain how she happened to be in the Forêt de Feu?"

Fielding shook his head. "Wasn't time, and I didn't ask her. We'd come up to the accident scene by then. But I'd been going to speak to you about that dead man, Shepherd. After the girl's story, I'd conjectured that perhaps you hadn't seen the body. But that was your reason for wanting a telephone as soon as you came into the *château* tonight, what?"

They were crossing the wrecked mezzanine of the main hall. Archambaud and his wife were moving in advance; and Bill Shepherd slowed to a lag, whispering to Fielding the circumstances surrounding the dead peasant. He concluded grimly, "The man had been dead about an hour, and he died from violence, Fielding. Fingernails dug in his throat, and the marks of a choking clutch on his neck. Murder."

Fielding gave him a straight look. "I was afraid you were going to say that. The description tallies. Shepherd, I saw that man this afternoon."

Bill Shepherd's feet stalled. "Where?"

"IN THE forest. I should say it was around half past five o'clock. I was on my bicycle. As I told you, I'd come into the forest for a bit of exercise. I couldn't say where it was exactly—there are a lot of paths in the woods—I'd judge it was a mile or so north of the wagon road. This fellow in the blue smock was in a clump of bushes."

"What was he doing?"

"I couldn't see very well. The sky was a bit overcast—do you remember, there was an odd sort of gloaming? But I think the chap was digging."

"Digging?" Bill Shepherd echoed.

"At least he was bent over in an industrious kind of way. Couldn't quite make out what he was up to in the underbrush —he might have been picking berries—but I had the impression he was working with a shovel. Only caught a glimpse of him.

"When he saw me, he gave me a startled look, dropped something in the brush and scuttled away. Struck me as all very furtive. I didn't seen anyone else around. The storm was making, and I took the nearest bypath for the *château.*"

Bill Shepherd thought, "So that's why I didn't see bicycle tracks on the wagon road." He said in a low voice, "Well, the peasant was murdered, Fielding. There's something going on in this forest. Other murders. You heard the old woman."

"And talk in the village," Fielding nodded. They were rounding into the corridor leading to the back bed chamber where the dog had first been heard. The Landrus were shuffling well in the lead.

Fielding's voice lowered confidentially. "If you don't mind my saying so, Shepherd, this forest of yours is a dashed gloomy property. All sorts of rumors about it, but I do understand there've been recent casualties around and the police can't seem to figure them out.

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"I don't like to put my finger in your business, so to speak—this is your *château* the domain, and I've been trespassing myself—but has it occurred to you that your caretakers might know more about this, than they've cared to divulge?"

He glanced at the couple entering the bed chamber ahead; and Bill Shepherd growled. "It hasn't only occurred to me, but when we get down to the kitchen, I'm having a word with the Landrus. Maybe the old woman's batty, and maybe"—he broke off with a gesture, but he finished the sentence in his mind—"maybe there's method in her madness."

Maybe a lot of things.

He hadn't forgotten old Bertrand's skittish conduct that morning, or the lady in black who had swooped out of the lawyer's door. He hadn't forgotten the value of this property. He wasn't forgetting, either, that Fielding was a stranger for all his open-handed conduct, that all these people were strangers. You couldn't help mistrust in your fellow man after a tour through a *château* that gave evidence to mankind's savagery, and with murder still afoot in the potter's field, all neighbors became suspect.

He said, "Stand by, will you, Fielding? While I question this pair. Then we'll drive out and take a look at that body on the road."

THE Landrus, however, could shed no night on the matter. If anything, their answers obscured it in deeper shade. Madame Landru did most of the talking. Bluntly ordered to tell what she knew of this latest and all previous murders, the old Frenchwoman lapsed into a mediumistic trance more glassy-eyed and fuzzy-haired than before.

"I said keep to facts." Bill Shepherd rejected her immediate references to the spirit world. "Did you know this peasant I've described, or didn't you?"

"Ah." *The old woman's eyes glazed over* in thought. She hooked a finger over her nose, thinking. "But I seem to recall such a neighbor, *monsieur*. A farmer who had a cabbage patch on the edge of the forest where now there is a Canadian cemetery. But I have not seen him in a long time."

"How long is that?"

"I have not seen him in twenty-three years, *monsieur*. He was shot and killed by the Germans in Nineteen-sixteen."

"This man was killed out there in the forest tonight," Bill Shepherd reminded sternly. "He was murdered not four miles from this *château*, and he was strangled to death. You—" He switched the question to Archambaud. "Do you recollect ever having seen the man?"

The gaunt caretaker edged backward against the shadowy brick oven, like a horse backing up in a stall. His eyes roamed the kitchen and settled finally into a nervous stare on his hoof-like wooden shoes.

"I do not recollect such a man, Monsieur Shepherd. I knew the farmer my wife refers to, but as she says, he was killed in Nineteen-sixteen. He was taken as a spy by the Germans, and they—"

"This man was murdered tonight, not twenty-three years ago. If you don't know who it was, say so."

Archambaud said so. He added that there were few neighbors living in the immediate vicinity of the Forêet de Feu, as the farmlands surrounding the woods were now cemeteries. He and his wife seldom left the *château*.

Perhaps once a month they went to Contalmaison or Thiepval after grocery supplies, but they did not spend much time in either village. They had no friends; new villagers had moved in since the War; many of the refugees driven out by the Germans had never come back; it was seldom that anyone came near the *château*.

"They know about the undead soldiers," Madame Landru droned in. "They fear the Forgotten of God. The peasant you found by the road tonight but proves what I have told you. The armies of the slain are in the forest. Their sentries must have killed him."

Bill Shepherd's jaw hardened.

You couldn't argue over ghosts with

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an old woman who was probably demented. Archambaud's mentality seemed little better. He found his glance going to Archambaud's hands—long-wristed, big-knuckled peasant's hands, no doubt capable of wringing someone's neck—but there had been previous murders in the forest—if this couple had had anything to do with them, it seemed incredible the police would not have found it out.

"Never mind the spirit legend, Madame Landru. What about the people killed around here in the last two or three years? You named a farmer and a blacksmith's daughter and a child."

"That is true. *Absolument.* The old Farmer Castignac, he had come with his dog one night after rabbits. A poacher, *oui,* setting traps out there in the forest. He was not of much account, a rascal. In the valley this side of Thiepval Village where he lived, he was known as an atheist. He did not believe in spirits, saints or demons, and he laughed at the stories about the Forgotten of God, even as he laughed at the legends of the church.

"Perhaps the undead soldiers in the forest heard him—perhaps he was killed by a stray bullet in the unseen battle—I do not know. *Enfin,* he was shot dead.

"It was not a night like this, but one of no moon, very dark, very quiet. Landru and I were here in the kitchen. We heard the rifle. We ran out. Theophile went with us, and found the body. Off there in the woods, perhaps ten minutes from the *château,* there is an old German cemetery, a front-line graveyard that has never been transplanted. Farmer Castignac was there. The bullet was in the back of his head. *Oui,* that was three years ago."

"What did the police do?"

"THEY came. They went. They did this thing and that. They said it was murder. But by what hand? From where? Farmer Castignac had no friends; at the same time, no enemies. He had only a dog and some traps, both there beside the body. The woods were surrounded and scoured. No killer with a rifle was found. No tracks.

"Landru and I were questioned—as if I could aim a rifle with this accursed growth on my neck!—as if Landru were a sharpshooter who could hit a man in the black of night! No assassin was ever apprehended by the police. Naturally!"

Archambaud mumbled, "There was one queer thing about it, Monsieur Shepherd. The police established the bullet was from a German Mannlicher rifle. No one in the countryside today possesses such a gun."

"Have you a rifle, Archambaud?"

The answer was a vigorous headshake. *"Non, monsieur.* I had a small carbine at the time, for shooting rats. The police who investigated took my carbine away."

"What police investigated?"

"The Lieutenant Jaloux, from the *gendarmerie* at Contalmaison," Madame Landru growled out the answer. "That good-for-nothing! A typical *agent* of police, cock of the walk with his curled mustachios and bullying manners. He said I was crazy when I told him the Battle of the Somme was still going on, and that Farmer Castignac had been killed by the living dead. *Alors,* it was he who investigated the death of the blacksmith's daughter five months later. I think that time he laughed from the other side of the mouth."

The blacksmith's daughter, as described by Madame Landru, had been a beautiful, but not dutiful, girl. Gaspard, her father, was the best horse-shoer in this district, and he had not deserved this tragedy.

Daughter Paulette had not stayed at home every evening as a respectable French girl should. No, she had preferred to stroll of an evening with the boys, even in winter. Her father had forbidden these strolls, but she took them anyway—this December night she had strolled too far.

As a matter of record, she had been riding in a cutter. With the son of the Mayor of Contalmaison. For reasons best known to Blacksmiths' daughters who go sleigh-riding with the sons of mayors, the girl had decided to walk home. She got out near the Forêt de Feu, and despite the efforts of the mayor's son to get her back into the sleigh—he had made a consider-

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able effort, judging from the scuffle-tracks left in the snow—the girl had determined to walk.

The boy's alibi had been unimpeachable. He had climbed back into the cutter and driven straight home. His tracks didn't follow the girl's on her lonely walk. No tracks followed the girl's. She had started through the snowy woods alone. There was a bright moon, but no one saw what happened or heard any shot.

The body might not have been soon discovered, had not Lieutenant Jaloux and one of his men happened up the highway in a police car. They saw where a sleigh had stopped and feet had scuffled at the roadside. They saw a girl's tracks go into the woods alone.

They thought, "What is that which is that?" and hurried after, on foot. What did they find? They found Paulette the blacksmith's daughter lying dying in the snow with a bullet in her neck. They cried, "*Ah-la-la,* Paulette—who shot you?"

She whispered, "I did not seen anyone!" and that was all. She died as they rushed her to the hospital.

They came back with police from three villages and looked for tracks. They did not find any track beside the girl's. They searched the woods for a mile around. There were no tracks in the snow. There should have been tracks within several hundred feet of the body, because the girl had been struck by a pistol bullet. There were no tracks anywhere.

That was when the police lieutenant began to laugh from the other side of his mouth.

"*Eh, bien.*" Madame Landru's eyes were somber. "There were those who said the case was hushed up because of the son of the mayor. There was a newspaper man up from Paris who said Lieutenant Jaloux could have chased and shot the girl himself. The *lieutenant* challenged him to a duel, and the newspaperman apologized because the *lieutenant* had a War-record as an expert marksman.

"Others claimed it was suicide, but could not explain why the girl did not have a pistol in her hand. Then? Then the inquest was dumbfounded. The bullet in the girl's neck was from a Webley-Fosbery pistol, such a pistol as the British officers carried in the War. But this was in Nineteen-thirty-seven. And this was the second death."

"And you said the third was a child?" Bill Shepherd probed.

"LAST month. A little girl. She had wandered away from her cottage in Thiepval Village. Everyone was already looking for her. They came to the *château* to ask if we had seen her. That night, too, there came up a thunderstorm.

"In the dark there were many crashes and much lightning. After the storm passed they found the child in an old shell-crater on the edge of the woods. Lightning, they said. But lightning could not have mangled the little body like that. She had been in an explosion—I know, for I had seen many like her—there were many children killed by the bombs thrown during the War.

"I tried to tell the people it was a hand grenade. That the explosions in the sky were not all thunder. That the little girl had been killed in the present Battle of the Somme."

The veil was over Madame Landru's eyes; her voice settled into a rune, an incantation.

"I have seen the dead soldiers walking—the midnight riders through the trees—the blind and gassed and maimed who have risen from their graves to fight. The police want foot-tracks, but the undead dead leave no footprints.

"The night Farmer Castignac was killed I saw the legless Uhlan go galloping down the road out there in the darkness. The night the blacksmith's daughter was killed I saw the armless French infantryman and the crippled Italian adjutant hurry past the kitchen window. And the night the little girl was killed I saw the blind Canadian officer on his crutches, led by the Russian airman who has no face.

"They were here when those others were

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killed, and they are here with the dead peasant tonight. The British and French—the Russians—the Italians—the Germans—"

That was enough. The old woman's murder mysteries needed no spectral embellishments. Bill Shepherd waved her silent to terminate the interview, and said to Archambaud, "Brandy. Hot coffee. Take care of those people out there."

Rounding on his heel, he linked his arm through the Englishman's, and when they were in the passage between kitchen and the dining *salon,* he asked, "Fielding, what do you think?"

"I think the old woman's a dash unhinged, you know."

"I mean about those other unexplained deaths. Farmer Castignac sniped through the head, and the murdered blacksmith's daughter and the little girl, and the police never finding any clues."

"Substantially they're the same tales I've heard noised around the village. Do you know the French people? Rational as cash registers on the surface; and underneath, a flare for the supernatural all wool and a yard wide."

"You'd think the police—"

"Remember, they're provincial police. Your Paris *gendarmerie* is as smart as the London Metropolitan and as tough as New York's Finest, but Contalmaison is a small town. Can't you see this Lieutenant Jaloux with his medals and mustachios? The local priest probably hears more at Saturday's confessionals than Jaloux could learn in a year of cross-questioning and examinations."

Bill Shepherd snapped, "He must be a dumb one."

"I wouldn't say that," Fielding spoke slowly. "Possibly he's been smart.

"Take the shooting of Farmer Castignac. The man was a poacher, an atheist, obviously a worthless character. French attitude would be, what did it matter? Probably saved the police a job. They'd poke around in the bushes a while, and give a couple of shrugs. Maybe some good citizen out hunting mistook Castignac for a wolf—they have 'em in the backwoods sometimes. Let the case go at that. The village atheist, you see, would have no political implications."

"Whereas the blacksmith's daughter, playing around with the mayor's boy, would."

FIELDING smiled faintly, "I'm only conjecturing. And of course from an Englishman's point of view. But I've been around this French countryside a bit, and I've even passed a few words with the mayor. Fat as pompousness, itself, with a red sash around his middle and a top hat on national holidays. Just the type to tell the police chief to keep his son's name out of the papers. Old Mustache-cup Jaloux knows his business. Such things have even happened in large cities, not necessarily French. Remember, Shepherd, I'm only guessing the same as you are."

And doing some pretty logical guessing, Bill Shepherd thought with a faint twinge of envy. He, Shepherd, was supposed to the mystery expert. Funny, wasn't it?

He'd written dozens of these who-killed-who yarns; yet confronted with mystery in fact, he was failing to rationalize. Maybe he'd spent too much time on involved, imaginary puzzles to be able to solve simple realities.

Fielding was saying in his quiet way, "The child is something else again. My guess would be lightning, though, from the story.

"There's a lot of old iron and trash in the forest and steel and barbed wire imbedded in the ground. Lightning plays queer tricks sometimes. Lieutenant Jaloux probably found himself on the spot about the child, and if the local peasantry want to believe in ghosts, I doubt if the police would work too hard to dispel the haunts.

"But they'll jump when they hear about this strangled peasant, I fancy. Another unsolved murder might cost the *lieutenant* his job."

They had paused in the passage for this consultation. Bill Shepherd said, moving forward, "Not that it matters in compari-

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son to human life, but these murders and spook yarns have probably cost me the *château.* I'll bounce this Lieutenant Jaloux out of bed on his ashcan, anyway. Come on, Fielding."

He strode in grim resolution. "We're driving to Contalmaison to wake up the cops, and we'll have a look at that body on the way. Since I've got to transfer the others to an inn, and my roadster can only take three at a time, it might be a good idea to go first with this Italian doctor. He can make a professional report on the dead man."

CHAPTER XVII

FINGERPRINTS OF DEATH

THE wide, arch-ceilinged room with the little group of people gathered about the fireplace looked almost cozy after a visit to the other apartments, *salons* and halls of the Château de Feu. At least this wing of the ruin was habitable.

Bill Shepherd asked Fielding if he would mind speaking to the doctor, and as the Englishman took Doctor Arnoldo aside, Bill Shepherd called, "Mademoiselle Gervais, would you mind stepping over here a minute?"

The French girl rose from a chair beside the Russian, and came across the room with questioning eyes.

She asked in a low voice. "Is something wrong, Monsieur Shepherd?"

"You know as much about it as I do," he said quietly. "Fielding told me you saw the dead man."

She said with a little shiver, *"Oui,* I saw him. It was exactly as I told Monsieur Fielding. I did not speak of it to you because—"

"I can understand. But I wish you'd tell me why you were driving through the forest in the first place."

"I told you, *monsieur.* The wedding was to have been this morning, and—"

He sighed, "All right, Mademoiselle Gervais. Now Fielding and I are taking the Italian doctor for a look at that body down the road. I'll drive them on to Contalmaison and come back with the police. Is there"—he gave her a level look—"any reason why you might not want to stay here until I get back? Would you like me to return to you your gun?"

"No, I do not mind staying. I—I would like you to have the pistol if you are going to stop out there in the forest."

Did the girl mean that? The expression of dark-eyed concern? She was certainly not hard to look at—brunette hair smoothed back and a freshening touch of lipstick, and—and there was that impression of having seen her somewhere—a remote familiarity.

"You'll be all right then?" he smiled. His glance went across the room. "Not afraid of ghosts?"

"Of ghosts, yes. Of people, no. They are only lost travelers like myself, indebted to you for your very kind hospitality."

Bill Shepherd felt that he had been brusque and muddle-headed and not at all hospitable.

He saw Doctor Arnoldo and Fielding at the front door, shouldering into their wet coats, and he called to the others at the fireplace, "Professor Putinov—Herr Kull—Monsieur"—(what was the little bus-driver's name?)—"Monsieur Tac. I'm driving over to the nearest village, and I'll be back for you inside half an hour. Archambaud is bringing you coffee and cognac, and will serve you in any way possible. Please make yourselves as comfortable as you can. *À bientôt."* He pressed the French girl's arm. "I won't be long."

HE DIDN'T like to leave her, and he was a little surprised that it should matter. Just the natural masculine protective instinct, of course, hardly necessary when he had left her in the company of three men.

But he didn't care much for Herr Kull on short acquaintance. The Russion and the little Frenchman he did not know. It seemed a little tough to leave anyone to the woozy séances of Malame Landru and the fumblings of her husband.

As he tooled the lumbering Hispano-

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Suiza down the driveway past the shell-smashed garden and out to the road, he couldn't help admitting that he, hoimself, was relieved to get out of the *château.*

But Gabrielle Gervais would be all right. Girls these days knew how to look out for themselves. She hadn't been any clinging vine when she had that gun. And she'd been a nurse, which meant she was pretty competent.

He fixed his attention to keeping the car on the mud-swamped road. Fielding, at his elbow, was telling the Italian doctor about the murdered peasant. The doctor exclaimed, "Murder? *Porca Maria!"* but made no further comment than, "Strangling is a rare form of homicide, is it not? I will be interested to see a case."

They drove the next mile in silence, their eyes concentrated on the muck-rutted roadbends.

Twice the heavy car slithered and slewed into a stall, and it was all Bill Shepherd could do to keep from bogging down. The rear wheels spun as though in gray paste; puddle-water splashed up into the windshield; he had to kick the transmission into low gear to give the tires traction.

The moon was obscured under cloud; the sky was grumbling again; the forest was pitchy black. Bill Shepherd looked at his wrist dial. Ten after twelve.

If he'd been writing this as a story, something should have happened at the stroke of midnight. The plot had missed an angle. He wished this had been fiction instead of fact; he didn't hanker to see that throttled peasant again. Five hours ago when he'd spied that body and come careening up this road—it seemed like five years.

They passed the French girl's Citroën coupé tilted in the roadside ditch.

Bill Shepherd nudged Fielding. "There's her car."

A little further on the Englishman said, "Funny thing, Shepherd. All evening I've had a feeling I've seen Miss Gervais somewhere before."

Bill Shepherd was a little startled. "That's odd. So have I."

"Do you know where?"

"No, I don't."

"Why"—Fielding smiled—"I've just been able to place her. Resemblances are strange things, aren't they? You think someone's face is somehow familiar, then it turns out they look like some other person you've seen in the past. Miss Gervais looks strikingly like Nurse Cavell."

"Nurse Cavell—?"

"Edith Cavell. You know. Famous nurse shot by the Germans as a spy during the War. Raised no end of anger against the Prussians. Of course Nurse Cavell was English and this girl is French—it's her profile, I guess, and the way she carries her chin. Just something in the expression."

Fielding added, groping into a pocket for his pipe, "Of course I never saw Edith Cavell to begin with. But I saw her picture on all the recruiting posters, and there's a statue of her in front of the National Portrait Gallery in London. You've doubtless seen pictures of her too; got 'em in the back of your memory. The French girl's expression could be her double."

IN THE pause that followed, Bill Shepherd tried to remember if he had ever seen a picture of Edith Cavell. No, she hadn't been on the American recruiting posters. He could recall one of Uncle Sam pointing a finger straight at you, and another of a doughboy in spotless uniform on the parapet of a trench waving a flag. *Do Your Bit! Save The World For Democracy!* All that had been in '17. Edith Cavell was earlier. She belonged to this middle period of the War. There couldn't have been much flag-waving here in this Red Zone.

Doctor Arnoldo's voice spoke through these thoughts with, "I guess that is your murdered peasant ahead."

Bill Shepherd brought the car to a halt beside the poppy-grown knoll. The body was lying as he had left it.

The Englishman and the Italian walked around it, exclaiming, and Bill Shepherd

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looked off at the night-hung thickets; he had seen the body before. Fielding snapped on his flashlight, and the Italian doctor knelt to the examination. The Englishman went through the dead man's pockets, as Bill Shepherd had done, and brought out the handful of coins and the St. Christopher medal.

Then Fielding moved to Bill Shepherd's side. His expression was puzzled. "George, Shepherd, here's a queer thing!"

Bill Shepherd asked, "What's that?"

"Look at these franc-pieces. All the money in that dead man's pocket is dated before and up to Nineteen-sixteen. Most of these coins are dated Nineteen-sixteen exactly, and they're an issue that hasn't been in circulation since the War."

"Those coins all date back to Nineteen-sixteen?"

"So does the silver medal. It's a kind they commonly sold to French *poilus* to keep them from harm."

Doctor Arnoldo's voice cut in with, "I have finished my examination, gentlemen." He had straightened to his feet and was aiming the flashlight down at the dead man's face. The doctor was pale.

Bill Shepherd asked huskily, "What did you find?"

"The marks on this peasant's throat are those of his own fingers. The skin is under the nails where he dug them into himself; from the thumb-prints it is apparent that he caught himself by the throat with his own hands. He clutched and tore at his own throat, that is evident. He was choking to death and in great pain."

Bill Shepherd glared. "You mean he choked himself to death?"

The Italian doctor shook his head. "Of course I cannot be positive. But from the bluish tinge to his skin—the blisters in his nostrils, palate and tongue—the condition of his throat membranes—I would say this man had died from poison gas."

TO BE CONTINUED NEXT WEEK

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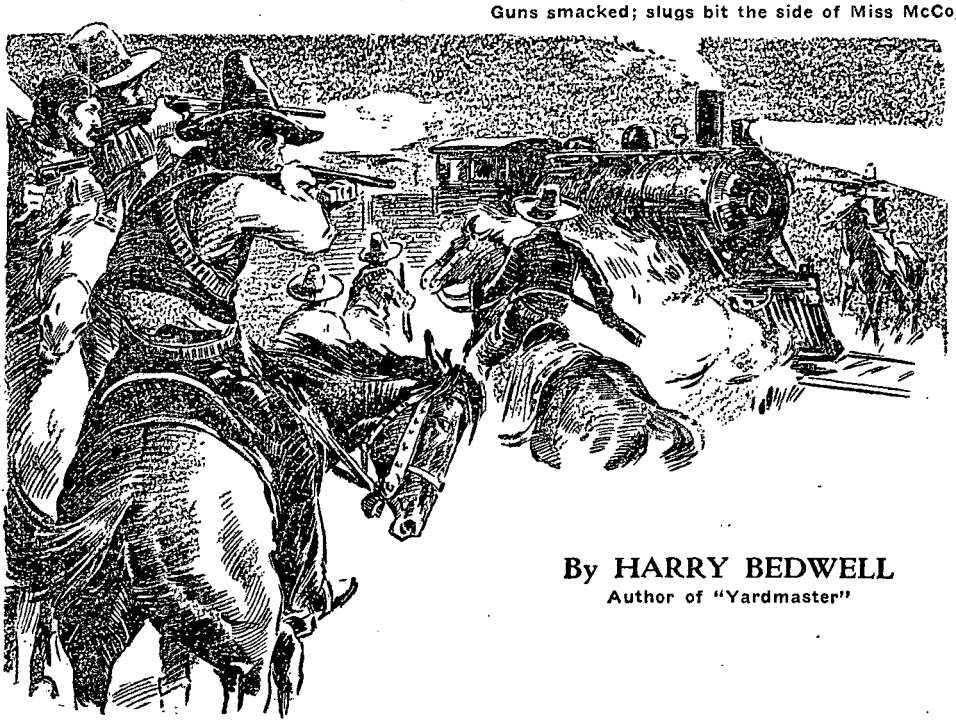
Guns smacked; slugs bit the side of Miss McCoy



By HARRY BEDWELL
Author of "Yardmaster"

Take 'Em Away, McCoy

She's a screechin' junk-heap on wheels. Hit 'er, though, and she's a machine gun. And a heroine . . .

SUNLIGHT backlashed from the smoking mountains and stabbed Archie Coin as he lifted up his big feet and hurried across the scorching railroad yard. He tramped into the trainmen's room in the low, dun station.

Gently he investigated the back of his neck. He had long confronted the elements from the right-hand cab window of a locomotive and his face was toughened to resist these attacks. But this desert sun assaulted from behind and peeled your ears.

In the office, Soley Smoot, the agent, had his heels on his desk, his chair tilted and his eyes closed. Archie considered him cautiously.

"Mebby," he suggested, "you like this private corner of hell. All the juice has been fired out of you and left nothing to raise a temperature."

Soley opened an eye a sixteenth and closed it again impatiently.

"Just because I'm nice to that Edith woman," Archie complained. "the trainmaster gets me soaked down here to yank a switch engine around with ore cars tied to her tail. I didn't have any idea she was his main object in life."

"You let the women alone," Soley snapped, "and you'll avoid most of your troubles."

Archie reflected. "Yeah," he decided, "but I'd also miss most of the fun." He felt his peeled ears tenderly and stared into the white sunlight. "Nobody ever told me the desert was like that," he muttered.

"They couldn't," Soley grunted.

The ranges rolled down from the north and stood petrified on the edge of the sand.

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Broken Bend had been tossed into the triangle of a gulch under smoking ramparts. High at the dead end of the apex, mine buildings humped under the lash of the sun. Sidings crawled under ridges beside the ore chutes.

The main line swung across the flare of the gulch, and yard and station blocked that opening. North of the tracks, down by the thin, crawling river, a nearly-dismantled army camp simmered. South of the railroad, Mexican shacks and houses showed among cottonwood and willow.

A concrete monument ran with melting heat and marked the boundary line of Mexico.

"That's right," Archie admitted. "You couldn't get enough words together in one place to name that."

An ominous rumble and smashing roar arose at the lower end of the yard. It sounded as if a machine shop was adrift. The things stamped down upon the station like an angry boiler works.

Archie glanced benevolently at the snub-nosed switch engine his fireman was bringing up from the coal chutes. The little locomotive was loose in all her parts and in motion she created these extraordinary sounds. Two switchmen were draped over her pilot beam. From 2 A.M. till whatever time they cleaned up the work, this lone crew and disreputable engine switched the Broken Bend yard.

Archie cocked an acute and affectionate ear that caught each tone in that medley of dissolution and registered its significance.

"Miss McCoy is really going to come apart some of these days," he said, "and she will then strew herself all about. Right now the section foreman has to gather up the parts she's dropped every morning so I can put her together enough to work." He beamed on his ailing yard goat smoking up the passing track.

Soley's parched face became disturbed. It puckered and his nose perked as at a repugnant odor. He opened his eyes.

"If that ain't the dangdest thing to be clattering about my yard," he said bitterly. "She adds some more racket to her every day. Why don't you send her in to the shop?"

"You shut up scorching Miss McCoy," Archie threatened darkly. "She's a good yard engine. A little noisy, but some women are. She's cheerful and willing, and she don't squawk about the work like some of your help."

"Miss McCoy!" Soley snorted. "That traveling hunk of scrap!"

THE yard engine clamored to a stop beside the station. Archie pulled on his gloves and gave Soley a baleful glance. He ambled out and climbed into the cab. He came down again with oil can and wrench. He began prodding and tapping in the locomotive's obscure parts.

Bill Murray, the switch-engine foreman, undraped himself from the pilot beam and wistfully considered Archie's southern exposure as the engineer bent between the drivers.

"Why don't you turn this scrap heap in," Bill inquired, "and get you an engine that can pull the hat off your head without driving you crazy?"

Archie withdrew five-eighths of his considerable length from under the boiler. "What was that?" he asked.

Bill glanced at the ominous blue eye and changed his mind. "Nothing," he said.

"That's right," Archie nodded. "All you got to do is give me the 'come hither,' and 'go away' signs with your hands. Me and Miss McCoy will undertake to do the work. The spoken ward ain't necessary between you and me."

"I just thought—" the switchman began.

"I knew you was trying to think," Archie stopped him. "That is the reason I held my temper."

Archie gave the clattering goat a hatful of steam and backed her down the lead. He brought her to a vociferous stand to permit a switchman to open the way to the military spur. Then the engine took up her routine uproar again and stamped over switch points. The spur was unballasted and had crawled under the kick of the sun.

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She dipped and floundered on the deficient siding, and she clanked in all her construction as she weaved toward the denuded army camp.

Archie checked and slowed her, and the switchman tied her onto a string of army outfit cars. The lieutenant in charge of the loading walked forward to confer with Bill Murray.

Archie hung on his elbows in the cab window and considered the young officer; then addressed him.

"Listen, Colonel," he invited. "From what I hear, you're leaving just in time to miss the trouble."

The lieutenant regarded the engineer without interest. "I think not," he remarked. "All those revolutionary bands are scattered or wiped out. We're leaving a detachment of cavalry here to guard you. But you won't be bothered."

"But Faquita says different," Archie protested. "She says this bandit the Lightning is just waiting till you move out the infantry, and then he's coming across and take the town."

"Who is Faquita?" the officer inquired politely.

Archie impeached him with a wagging forefinger. "Why, Colonel," he chided. "You don't know Faquita Catalina Enriquito Bustamante? This army ain't what it used to be. Faquita is a sweep pod of red chili pepper that lives down there in Sonora town with her people and the goats. She's worth staying over to get acquainted with, Colonel."

The lieutenant shook his head. "You can hear all kinds of wild rumors along this border. The Intelligence Section gathers the information we act on."

"Then your intelligent fellas ought to look up Faquita," Archie declared. "She's around where the information is made."

But the lieutenant shrugged off all suggestions.

ARCHIE noted, however, that there was an officer now standing by who was concerned. He was First Sergeant Ricker who commanded the troop of cavalry that remained for guard and patrol duty. The sturdy cavalryman had come forward for a word with the lieutenant and had become profoundly interested in the passing remarks.

"I'll bet," Archie offered, indicating the sergeant, "that the general there knows Faquita. He's got the old army eye that never misses."

Ricker's leather complexion grew duskier, and he gave Archie a top-kick's look that aimed to blast.

The lieutenant laughed and turned with Bill Murray back along cars and coaches loaded with infantrymen and their equipment.

The sergeant came close under the cab window. "Look here, trainmaster," he snapped.

"Just call me Archie," the engineer said kindly. "Or else look pleasant when you name me trainmaster."

"Okay," agreed Ricker shortly. "But tell me, where does this Faquita live? I'd like to know her."

"General," Archie beamed, "that sounds like the army. But I won't help you beat my time with that nice uniform of yours. You do your own scouting."

"I'm not going to do anything beyond my duty," the sergeant growled.

"That's what I'm afraid of," Archie nodded.

"Sa-ay now!" Ricker choked. "I'm in command of this cavalry detachment left to guard you people. I've mostly got to dig up my own information, and I ought to know the people who'll likely know what's going to happen before it comes off. If this woman is in communication with some of those bands below the border, I ought to know her. I'll not cut your throat with her."

Archie shook a regretful head. "That might get her in trouble with her own people," he decided. "But me, I'll listen, and if I hear anything I think you ought to know, I'll pass it along."

The sergeant swore briefly.

Bill Murray signaled a go-ahead from the rear, and Archie took up the compli-

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cated task of making his locomotive start this National Guard outfit on its return to civilian life.

A week later, Sergeant Ricker hunted Archie down by the racket of Miss McCoy, and climbed into the noisy cab.

"I've been investigating your Faquita somewhat," he stated blandly.

Archie turned on his seat and gave the cavalryman a look.

"Keep your shirt on," Ricker said hastily. "I was just after information. I thought you'd be interested in some of it. That bandit leader, the Lightning, considers Faquita nobody's business but his, and in my opinion he'd cut your neck off if he saw you holding hands with her—like I did."

"When was that?" Archie snapped.

"Last night," Ricker explained. "It was all right with me, not a bit of my business, and my discovery was an accident. But if you had that kind of a mischance with the Lightning, it wouldn't likely come out the same."

"Did you get yourself any useful information?"

"Not enough," Ricker admitted. "The Lighting is dangling around, all right. And he's crazy enough to start something. I wish I had a machne gun squad here. I was with the outfit down south that stopped him from crossing the border with one machine gun. That made a believer of him. I don't think he'd try anything on this side if he knew we had one."

"Why don't you get you one?" Archie inquired.

"You take it up with the War Department," Ricker snapped, "and see what you draw."

AT 7:30 of a later evening, the yard crew began shoving three drags of empty ore cars into the mine sidings for loading. At 10:15 Bill Murray tied the switch engine onto the last long string of open top equipment, and Miss McCoy pushed. She clanked and snorted and rammed. The line of cars moved back slowly and arched around the bend.

Then in the pale gleam of the headlight, Archie got the distant loom of two riders crossing the yard at the east end, headed north. Three minutes later, two more moved across. His hand dropped uncertainly to the handle of the air-brake valve.

Faquita hadn't met him at their rendezvous the night before; and there seemed —from the little he could observe from the distant dark—to be considerable stealthy movement in the Mexican village. He had passed the word to Sergeant Ricker, and he wondered now what the cavalryman had done about it.

Again the headlight picked up two figures, this time afoot, hurrying down the siding toward him.

Archie shoved the throttle against the boilerhead and gave the air valve a seven-pound reduction. The engine sneezed and her outcry subsided as she eased the string of empties to a stand. He rolled from his seat and slid to the ground.

The two figures came around the front end of the locomotive and a choked soft voice said, "Arch-ee!"

He caught the stumbling form. He crooned, "My little sweet potato!"

Sergeant Ricker said briskly over the girl's shoulder, "Something's busted loose, and I'd say you'd quick better find out what it is. It's coming to a boil down in Sonora town, and I was trying to observe what, when I caught Faquita headed this way. She wouldn't tell me a thing, except she wanted you."

The girl whimpered into Archie's collar, "You must get from here quick. The Lightning is coming with all his men, and he has promised to destroy you and the town. Someone has told him I am your little sweet spud."

"That," Archie declared, "is bad."

"I could not get away sooner to tell you," she murmured. "He came last night, and when he find I am your little petunia, he put a guard on my house. He says he will cut your heart out."

"I guess he was bound to try it some time," Archie decided. "When is he going to start?"

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"Now," she said. "Already men are slipping over to the army camp, very quiet, two at a time. When they are ready, those men begin shooting to keep the soldiers away from the town. Then the Lightning with the rest will ride into Broken Bend and loot. But first he kill you."

Archie took off a glove and scratched a peeling ear. "That don't leave us much time," he reflected.

"It gives you plenty to get out of this entire section of the country," Ricker pointed out. "And I hope enough for me to get back to camp and organize. I'll see you after the battle—if you come back."

"Now, wait a minute," Archie pleaded.

He studied the dark sidings, lined with empty cars. He estimated the distance from tip to tip of the two ridges between which the town was cradled.

"How many men have you got at camp?" he asked.

"Fifteen now. There'll be sixteen in a few minutes."

"Three men with plenty of ammunition," Archie figured, "could kick up enough fuss to make the bandits think the camp was full of soldiers, couldn't they? They're not going to fight. They'll just try to scare you. Then why don't you bring the rest of your crew over here where the fighting will be good?"

"Wait a minute, switchman," the sergeant snapped. "Whose army are you commanding?"

"Aw, General," Archie coaxed. "Ain't you got no tactics? I can drag a string of empties across from ridge to ridge in front of the town, and that way riders can only get in at a little space at each end—about two at a time. You could put men at each end to plug those little holes."

"You may have something there, trainmaster," Ricker admitted hurriedly. "But I'll have to think about it as I go along. If I don't find anything wrong with the plan by the time I get to camp, I'll be back. Otherwise, no."

"You'll find me where you hear Miss McCoy working," Archie called as Ricker went quickly into the darkness.

"We go away now, you and me?" Faquita pleaded.

"Naw," said Archie. "What the heck! We got to stop this Lightning from striking the town."

A LANTERN had been advancing resolutely along the string of empties, and now a specific inquiry blasted from the dark as Bill Murray required to know if that she-goat had dropped a driver.

"Bill," said Archie genially, "this is Faquita. She came to tell us that the Lightning and his gang are on the way to break us all apart."

Bill swung his lantern in their faces. "You're not kidding me, Archie. Then we'd better highball out of here, and do it now. I don't want those hombres shooting at me. Let's see if you can really run, or are you just a jogger."

"Don't be in a hurry," Archie restrained him. "Come on up in the cab, and I'll tell you something else. We got time."

He helped Faquita up the vertical steps and placed her forward on his seat. He checked the steam gauge and had a word with his fireman.

Bill hung on the steps, protesting.

"Is your switchman all right back there?" Archie called. "I'm going ahead."

Air sizzled, and the yard engine stamped into a pull.

"Bill," Archie yelled above the uproar, "it's a well-known fact that Mexicans can't shoot straight. As thin as you are, they'd have as much chance of hitting you as the edge of a sheet of paper. You and me are going to be heroes tonight, and I'll tell you how."

He did, plausibly.

"All you got to do," he instructed, "is hike back and stop me when the tail end of this string clears the siding. Then back me in on the next one and tie me onto the empties, and give me a go-ahead. That many cars ought to plug the gap."

"Sure," Bill said bitterly. "And me all the time moving around with a lantern in my hand. It'd be the first thing they'd shoot at. And if they're such bad shots,

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they'd nail me instead of the lantern."

"You got plenty time," Archie assured him cheerfully.

"I'll go," Bill decided. "But if I change my mind, I'm telling you I'll leave at once without notice."

"When you've got me tied onto that second string," Archie called, "run over and tell the folks in town the Lightning is coming."

Bill's lantern streaked through the night toward the rear.

The rowdy engine alarmed Faquita. "Does it always sound like this?" she cried.

"Oh, there's usually a certain amount of noise," Archie admitted.

"Hold her!" yelled the fireman across the cab as he caught Bill's signal.

They backed onto the second string. Air sighed at the coupling and the pump churned.

Archie shoved the Johnson bar over, and stood up. He pinched the throttle and crooned, "Come on, old gal. Let's get going."

The locomotive grunted and hissed. She tossed out one deep, resolute blast of the stack. She shuddered. The low thunder of drawbars fled down the line of cars and fadded deep in the dark under the west ridge.

Wham! The exhaust blew off again. The drivers slipped and churned. The engine stuttered angrily. Archie eased the throttle and the low wheels caught. The locomotive howled.

"That's really more than I ought to ask you to pull," Archie considered. "But you gotta do it now. Get in and dig, old pumpkin pie!" he shouted.

Faquita's eyes lost their startled look. They began to glow dangerously.

The drivers slipped again as he fed more steam. Fire ringed them and flared from the stack. Archie worked with swift, guileful reaches of his long arms. The drivers hung and wailed.

"She can't handle them," the fireman yelled from the deck. "Half my fire's gone up the chimney."

"Keep her hot," Archie flung back

He nipped the throttle an accurate inch. The yard goat strained desperately at the sullen drag. It was all dead weight, with the slack out, and those hundreds of wheels clung stolidly to the rails. He gave the latch another gentle tug.

"Take 'em away, my sweet Bermuda onion," Archie cajoled. "Make 'em walk for you."

Faquita's eyes sparked. "How is this?" she cried. "I am your sweet spud, and she is your sweet onion. I do not like that!"

"Aw, honey," Archie grinned. "I've got to talk her into this."

Slowly, under Archie's cunning hand, she steadied. The exhaust slammed and the drivers ground morosely. Car wheels complained in thin screeches and turned reluctant inches.

The fireman slammed the firebox door and caught his breath and strained with the straining locomotive. "Turn 'em, baby!" he whooped.

The long string got into drowsy motion and clucked indifferently at rail joints. The clamor of the engine enlarged.

"Atta old girl!" Archie yelled, and slapped the boilerhead with a heavy glove.

"I do not like you to call her such," Faquita sniffed.

"You've got to kid 'em along," Archie replied, unguardedly.

"So?"

A gun went off like a bark. A splutter of shots began, and flecks of fire danced in a swarm down by the cavalry camp.

ARCHIE hung out of the window and examined the dark toward the Mexican settlement. There was a vague mass movement down there above where the stars dipped to the line of the treetops. He dropped to the deck and squatted and inspected the fire.

"Fill her up," he instructed the fireman. "And then take the girl and unload. Somebody'll start shooting at us next."

"I'll wait till they do," the fireman decided.

The switch goat struggled like a hooked

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worm on the end of a long line. The grade climbed at about one-half of one percent. Miss McCoy could just manage to keep the string moving.

The racket of guns grew. Archie wondered if the sergeant hadn't been able to disengage himself from that fight, or if he had decided not to.

The edge of a moving mass of riders showed in the headlight. The tip of the farther ridge made an outline against the stars as the engine crawled by the station. There were a lot of horsemen in that outfit. They kept coming into the wedge of light, a disorderly crowd moving along the main line at a cautious walk.

Archie called, "Hey, clinkers! You take Faquita and get out of here. This is going to be bad."

"I ain't got the time," said the fireman as he shot in another scoop of coal.

Faquita snuggled. "I will stay with my Arch-ee," she purred.

"Duck into the tender then," he ordered, "and keep your head down."

The cab reeked of hot metal and leaking steam and burned oil.

The head of the column of riders paused, and those behind bunched up on the leaders. They crowded farther from the track as the locomotive crawled at them.

A gun flickered and smacked. A slug clipped the side of the cab. Archie slid hastily to the deck behind the boilerhead and snared the whistle cord above his head. He pulled in quick jerks that made the whistle yelp. The shrill clamor was flung up the gulch and tumbled back again and fled across the desert.

The mob boiled over. Particles tore away across the flat. The rest simmered and churned as the whistle blared.

"Hey!" yelled the fireman. "You ain't got enough steam to keep that up."

Horses came pounding in from the darkness on the right. Archie fumbled a brake club from beside his seat-box and crouched by the gangway. Riders surged under the cab. One snatched the grab iron and slid to the steps.

"Just like a motion picture," Archie informed himself, and knocked the man loose with the club.

Men dismounted, tried to rush the gangway. Slugs slammed into the boiler, and the headlight was shot out.

He could taste the dust that blew in from churning hoofs. He stood up to swing at an array of heads that surged up the steps. A hand clamped on his foot and pulled him off balance to his knees.

Two men scrambled in and clawed him down.

They swarmed over him on the deck before the roaring firebox. He got a blurred flash of the fireman lashing out with his scoop. He felt quick vibrations under him as heavy bodies came charging up the steps on the other side of the cab.

He rolled and kicked with big feet that tore loose and tossed away anything moveable they contacted. Faquita's shriek once dominated the thousand other sounds.

The scrambled bodies were suddenly heaved from him and tossed into the outer darkness. Archie bounced to his feet. The cab was full of husky figures carrying guns. Sergeant Ricker's voice snarled in the tumult.

"Get up in the tender, men," he ordered.

Men climbed over the coal and heads were thrust above the tank. Carbines began to slam.

"Can't this rat trap make any speed?" Ricker demanded.

"She's doing right well for her size," Archie yelled back hotly. "Give her time."

"We haven't got much," Ricker warned.

Someone out there shouted curses in Spanish and thundered commands.

"They're coming for us," the sergeant said grimly. "Hank, you and Joe get down here and protect the gangways."

A slug glanced from the sand dome and howled in the night.

"A helluva spot you've got us in with your tactics," Ricker swore. "Can't you kick this bird-cage in the pants and make it go?"

"You keep 'em knocked off," Archie reassured him sharply, "and Miss McCoy'll make it."

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FLICKERING blades of light from the firebox probed cab and tender in restless search. The riders began to yell. A detachment of them circled in front of the inching locomotive to come at it from the other side. Crowding hoofs pattered in soft earth and struck leaping sparks from granite.

They came with a rush.

Men twisted from saddles and congested at the cab steps. They swarmed into the empty ore car behind the engine and came over the rear of the tender.

The racket of guns and furious voices crowded the dark ridges.

"Now half of them are between us and the town," the sergeant snarled. "It won't do any good to shut the rest of them out. I'm going to take the outfit and try to cut our way through to the station. It's no good staying here where they can't miss us."

"Aw, you won't quit us like that," Archie challenged.

"You're all going along," Ricker snapped. "Man, we're in a trap here." He climbed over the coal to instruct his men in the tender.

Archie stared appealingly at Miss McCoy's throbbing boilerhead. A bullet grooved its way across the diameter of that circle under his startled eye. And as if that had set off some alarm system, a cackle broke from the locomotive, a sudden new jet of ragged sound. It ran up to a savage mutter, and then checked abruptly.

The tumult of fighting men wavered and died. Horses were reined back sharply and scrambling figures stood still.

The ominous clatter flared again. It flowed through all the other clamor of the locomotive in a grim chuckle. The malicious laughter ran along the ridges and the racket of it multiplied under high walls.

Horses lunged under the quick rake of spurs and the wrench of bridle reins. They wheeled and crowded and collided. Men spilled from the empty ore car behind the tender and flung themselves desperately at any riderless animal.

The horde disrupted, fighting only for clearance. It exploded, and its fragments were tossed into the desert, fleeing recklessly toward Mexico. Men on foot, unable to recover a horse, ran and cursed.

A satisfied grin widened Archie's long face as he regarded the scar across Miss McCoy's countenance.

The snub-nosed engine sounded as if her entire internal economy were in dissolution and she shuddered as if she were about to be violently ill. The east ridge loomed overhead on the left.

Archie shut the throttle and set all those rolling wheels with one sweep of the brake-valve handle. The engine squatted and took the nudge of the line of empties as brakeshoes clashed.

Silence fell like an explosion.

Sergeant Ricker waded through the coal in the tender and peered warily into the flickering cab. "Hey!" he shouted. "I thought that was a machine gun."

"Sure," agreed Archie blandly. "And so did that Lightning man."

"Yeah, but what was it?" Ricker bawled.

Archie beamed. "It was Miss McCoy making a noise like one," he murmured parentally.

Men came down from the tender and moved into the cab.

"Anybody hurt?" The sergeant checked them.

"Miss McCoy is," Archie stated.

He looked her over. The right side of the cab was splintered and without glass. Some of the boilerhead fixtures had been shot away. Steam screeched from places it shouldn't and water spurted from the tank.

"She'll have to go through the back shop now," Archie said. "But she stopped a blamed good raid getting herself in that condition. And she can still go in under her own power."

"Arch-ee!" spoke Faquita sharply. "Do you like this Miss McCoy better than me?"

"Why, sweet potato," he chided. "You know there ain't no comparison."

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Argonotes.

The Readers' Viewpoint

WE WERE thinking recently how satisfying it is to have a tradition. Almost every week there is a letter on the desk, beginning: "I have been reading ARGOSY for thirty years . . ." Or twenty years, or forty. The point is that the name ARGOSY has come to mean more than merely the copy you see displayed on the newsstands today. The people who have read the magazine for thirty years will tell you that; they helped to make the tradition.

A tradition is a solid thing to depend on, if you treat it with intelligent respect. Lately, traditions of various sorts have been collapsing all over the world; and so you will pardon us if we talk rather loudly about ours—still in good condition. We plan to protect it from the Vandals.

In the letter following you will find a nice illustration of how a tradition comes to be.

CHARLES BOYNTON

For about thirty-five years my father has read ARGOSY. I started almost five years ago and cannot longer refrain from voicing my thoughts in regards to this fine magazine. I can truthfully say I was never wholly dissatisfied with any story I have ever read in the ARGOSY. I really favor fantastics but can thoroughly enjoy a good Western or sport story.

I am especially glad Hilarious Henry is going with the movies. The Kildare pictures and "Fast and Loose", taken from the stories in ARGOSY, were excellent.

I have been intending to make a library of ARGOSIES.

From the later issues of the ARGOSY the stories: "The Synthetic Men of Mars", "Lost Harbors", "Seven Out of Time" and Hilarious Henry were exceptional. To "Minions of the Moon", "Seven Footprints to Satan" and Zagat's "Tomorrow" I give extra special honors.

I really hope to see more of the "Children of Tomorrow" and Mark and Omega in "Minions of the Moon".

ENCINO, CALIF.

M.E.

I quite agree with your myriad fans who want to hear more of wacky Omega.

Wm. Gray Beyer and A. Merritt are the favorite authors of this house. Every one in the family reads ARGOSY and Detective Ficton Weekly. I am only 13 but I have kept up with your magazines for many a year.

Why don't you try to get Beyer to create other characters too?

A. Merritt writes very good stories and we all enjoy his novels.

PENSACOLA, FLA.

THE Friends of Omega seem to be rapidly gaining in number. We told you some weeks ago that Mr. Beyer had definitely promised us that he would further explore the career of his remarkable character. That promise still holds good, and we should be able to announce Omega's next appearance very soon. . . . If you have been wondering how the Canadians live so happily through their long winters, here is your answer.

MRS. J. A. BLADES

Having spent my holiday in Washington, U. S., this July has encouraged me to write.

My U. S. relatives and friends have the idea that we in Alberta, Canada exist or even thrive on potatoes and snow-balls, but we also have our ARGOSY every week.

And how we do enjoy this magazine, no matter what comes there is a story in each one we read, re-read and discuss over and over.

One in particular was "Calling Doctor Kildare". Also the Henry stories.

Although I will admit there are some I prefer to read in the daylight for peace of mind.

All-in-all they couldn't be better, so keep up the good work.

BULWARK, ALBERTA

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Gratifying to know that we're wafting across thousands of miles of brine to make a commonwealth of bookworms. So says

L. M. BARRON

Having just finished another exceedingly good copy of the ARGOSY, I decided to let you know how good I thought it was.

I will also take the opportunity of congratulating Allan Elston on his great work in the serial, "Lost Harbors." In my opinion Marco Page comes up among the best with "Fast Company" and "Fast and Loose."

While I'm at it I might as well give you my opinion on "Seven Out of Time." I really like the general idea of the story, but I think Mr. Zagat tied a bit too much elastic on the ends of it.

The average Australian does not read too much. The daily paper is about as far as they usually get, but I believe if ARGOSY was introduced to more the average Aussie would rapidly become a bookworm.

Thanking you for the many hours of entertainment.

ATHERTON, AUSTRALIA

FRED MINTER

In reply to O.M. in the July 29th issue I should like to say that although I enjoy the science-fiction stories I should not care to see them featured to the exclusion of all other types of stories. Variety is the reason that I have been a constant reader of Argosy since 1926. My favorite type of story has always been a Western, yet I do not care to read more than one each week be it in serial, novelet or short story form. I also look forward to the historical, Northern and sports yarns.

Am getting a big kick out of McDowell's "The Ringer." Having played college football and now in the coaching game myself it is refreshing to read the truth about college athletics in general. I know a football coach of a rather prominent Eastern college who starts with about two dozen youngsters each fall all of whom think that they are going to get "Everything" for four years. Yet it is very rare that more than six or seven are in college at the start of the second semester. After looking them over for three months he decides which ones he wants to keep and by devious ways gets rid of the others. Incidentally this particular coach is not paid any salary, but gets a per cent of the gate receipts.

Looking Ahead!

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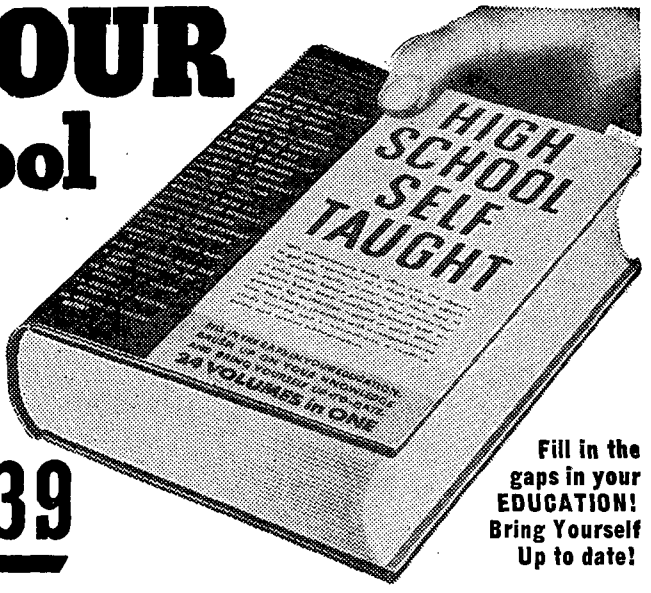

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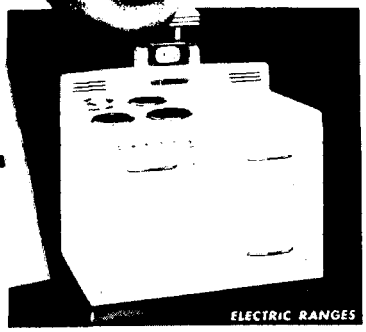

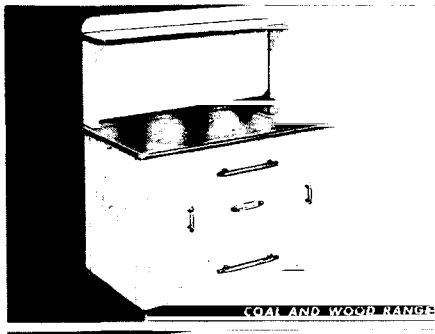

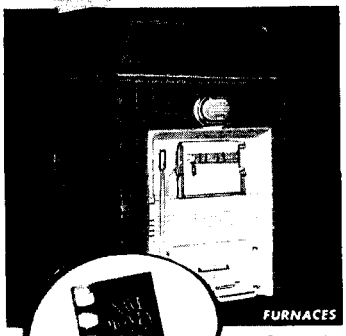

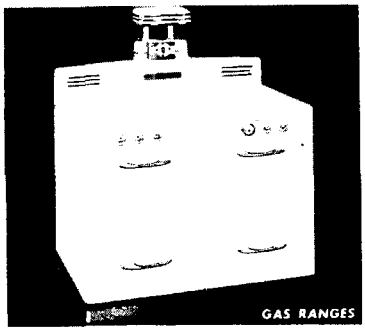

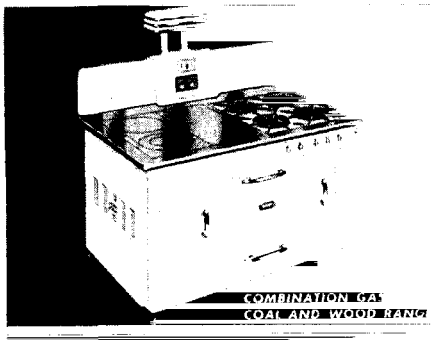

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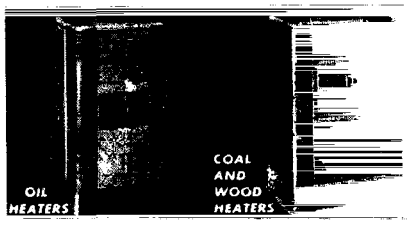

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